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LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.

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BY

M. E. BRADDON,

AUTHOR OF "AURORA FLOYD."

3770

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

THE WRITING IN THE BOOK.

Mr. Audley rose from the dinner-table and walked over to the cabinet in which he kept the document he had drawn up relating to George Talboys. He unlocked the doors of this cabinet, took the paper from the pigeon-hole marked *Important*, and seated himself at his desk to write. He added several paragraphs to those in the document, numbering the fresh paragraphs as carefully as he had numbered the old ones.

"Heaven help us all," he muttered once; "is this paper, with which no attorney has had any hand, to be my first brief?"

He wrote for about half an hour, then replaced the document in the pigeon-hole, and locked the cabinet. When he had done this, he took a candle in his hand, and went into the room in which were his own portmanteaus and the trunk belonging to George Talboys.

He took a bunch of keys from his pocket, and tried them one by one. The lock of the shabby old trunk was a common one, and at the fifth trial the key turned easily.

"There'd be no need for anyone to break open such a lock as this," muttered Robert, as he lifted the lid of the trunk.

He slowly emptied it of its contents, taking out each article separately, and laying it carefully upon a chair by his side. He handled the things with a respectful tenderness, as if he had been lifting the dead body of his lost friend. One by one he laid the neatly folded mourning garments on the chair. He found old meerschaum pipes, and soiled, crumpled gloves that had once been fresh from the Parisian maker; old play bills, whose biggest letters spelled the names of actors

who were dead and gone; old perfume bottles, fragrant with essences, whose fashion had passed away; neat little parcels of letters, each carefully labelled with the name of the writer; fragments of old newspapers; and a little heap of shabby, dilapidated books, each of which tumbled into as many pieces as a pack of cards in Robert's incautious hand. But amongst all the mass of worthless litter, each scrap of which had once had its separate purpose, Robert Audley looked in vain for that which he sought—the packet of letters, written to the missing man by his dead wife Helen Talboys. He had heard George allude more than once to the existence of these letters. He had seen him once sorting the faded papers with a reverent hand; and he had seen him replace them, carefully tied together with a faded ribbon which had once been Hellen's, amongst the mourning garments in the trunk. Whether he had afterwards removed them, or whether they had been removed since his disappearance by some other hand, it was not easy to say; but they were gone.

Robert Audley sighed wearily as he replaced the things in the empty box, one by one, as he had taken them out. He stopped with the little heap of tattered books in his hand, and hesitated for a moment.

"I will keep these out," he muttered: "there may be something to help me in one of them."

George's library was no very brilliant collection of literature. There was an old Greek Testament and the Eton Latin Grammar: a French pamphlet on the cavalry sword exercise; an odd volume of *Tom Jones*, with one half of its stiff leather cover hanging to it by a thread; Byron's *Don Juan*, printed in a murderous type, which must have been invented for the special advantage of oculists and opticians; and a fat book in a faded gilt and crimson cover.

Robert Audley locked the trunk and took the books under his arm. Mrs. Maloney was clearing away the remains of his repast when he returned to his sitting-room. He put the books aside on a little table in a corner of the fire-place, and waited patiently while the laundress finished her work.

He was in no humour even for his meerschaum consoler; the yellow papered fictions on the shelves above his head seemed stale and profitless —he opened a volume of Balzac, but his uncle's wife's golden curls danced and trembled in a glittering haze, alike upon the metaphysical diablerie of the *Peau de Chagrin*, and the hideous social horrors of *Cousine Bette*. The volume dropped from his hand, and he sat wearily watching Mrs. Maloney as she swept up the ashes on the hearth, replenished the fire, drew the dark damask curtains, supplied the simple wants of the canaries, and put on her bonnet in the disused clerk's office, prior to bidding her employer good night. As the door closed upon the Irishwoman, he rose impatiently from his chair, and paced up and down the room.

"Why do I go on with this," he said, "when I know that it is leading me, step by step, day by day, hour by hour, nearer to that conclusion which of all others I should avoid? Am I tied to a wheel, and must I go with its every revolution, let it take me where it will? Or can I sit down

here to-night and say, I have done my duty to my missing friend; I have searched for him patiently, but I have searched in vain? Should I be justified in doing this? Should I be justified in letting the chain which I have slowly put together, link by link, drop at this point, or must I go on adding fresh links to that fatal chain, until the last rivet drops into its place and the circle is complete? I think and believe that I shall never see my friend's face again; and that no exertion of mine can ever be of any benefit to him. In plainer, crueller words, I believe him to be dead. Am I bound to discover how and where he died? or being, as I think, on the road to that discovery, shall I do a wrong to the memory of George Talboys by turning back or stopping still? What am I to do? What am I to do?"

He rested his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands. The one purpose which had slowly grown up in his careless nature until it had become powerful enough to work a change in that very nature, made him what he had never been before—a Christian; conscious of his own

weakness; anxious to keep to the strict line of duty; fearful to swerve from the conscientious discharge of the strange task that had been forced upon him; and reliant on a stronger hand than his own to point the way which he was to go. Perhaps he uttered his first thoroughly earnest prayer that night, seated by his lonely fireside, thinking of George Talboys. When he raised his head from that long and silent reverie, his eyes had a bright, determined glance, and every feature in his face seemed to wear a new expression.

"Justice to the dead first," he said, "mercy to the living afterwards."

He wheeled his easy chair to the table, trimmed the lamp, and settled himself to the examination of the books.

He took them up one by one, and looked carefully through them, first looking at the page on which the name of the owner is ordinarily written; and then seaching for any scrap of paper which might have been left within the leaves. On the first page of the Eton Latin Grammar the

name of Master Talboys was written in a prim scholastic hand; the French pamphlet had a careless G. T. scrawled on the cover in pencil, in George's big, slovenly caligraphy; the *Tom Jones* had evidently been bought at a book-stall, and bore an inscription, dated March 14th, 1788, setting forth that the work was a tribute of respect to Mr. Thomas Scrowton, from his obedient servant, James Anderley; the *Don Juan* and the Testament were blank. Robert Audley breathed more freely: he had arrived at the last but one of the books without any result whatever; and there only remained the fat gilt-and-crimson-bound volume to be examined before his task was finished.

It was an annual of the year 1845. The copper-plate engravings of lovely ladies who had flourished in that day were yellow and spotted with mildew; the costumes grotesque and outlandish; the simpering beauties faded and common-place. Even the little clusters of verses (in which the poet's feeble candle shed its sickly light upon the obscurities of the artist's meaning)

had an old-fashioned twang; like music on a lyre whose strings are slackened by the damps of time. Robert Audley did not stop to read any of these mild productions. He ran rapidly through the leaves, looking for any scrap of writing or fragment of a letter which might have been used to mark a place. He found nothing but a bright ring of golden hair, of that glittering hue which is so rarely seen except upon the head of a child,—a sunny lock which curled as naturally as the tendril of a vine; and was very opposite in texture, if not different in hue, to the soft, smooth tress which the landlady at Ventnor had given to George Talboys after his wife's death. Robert Audley suspended his examination of the book, and folded this yellow lock in a sheet of letter-paper, which he sealed with his signet-ring, and laid aside, with the memorandum about George Talboys and Alicia's letter, in the pigeon-hole marked important. He was going to replace the fat annual amongst the other books, when he discovered that the two blank leaves at the beginning were stuck together. He was so

determined to prosecute his search to the very uttermost, that he took the trouble to part these leaves with the sharp end of his paper-knife; and he was rewarded for his perseverance by finding an inscription upon one of them. This inscription was in three parts and in three different hands. The first paragraph was dated as far back as the year in which the annual had been published, and set forth that the book was the property of a certain Miss Elizabeth Ann Bince who had obtained the precious volume as a reward for habits of order, and for obedience to the authorities of Camford-house Seminary, Torquay. The second paragraph was dated five years later, and was in the handwriting of Miss Bince herself, who presented the book as a mark of undying affection and unfading esteem (Miss Bince was evidently of a romantic temperament) to her beloved friend Helen Maldon. The third paragraph was dated September, 1853, and was in the hand of Helen Maldon, who gave the annual to George Talboys; and it was at the sight of this third paragraph that Mr. Robert

Audley's face changed from its natural hue to a sickly, leaden pallor.

"I thought it would be so," said the young man, shutting the book with a weary sigh. "God knows I was prepared for the worst, and the worst has come. I can understand all now. My next visit must be to Southampton. I must place the boy in better hands."

CHAPTER II.

MRS. PLOWSON.

Amongst the packet of letters which Robert Audley had found in George's trunk, there was one labelled with the name of the missing man's father—the father, who had never been too indulgent a friend to his only son, and who had gladly availed himself of the excuse afforded by George's imprudent marriage to abandon the young man to his own resources. Robert Audley had never seen Mr. Harcourt Talboys; but George's careless talk of his father had given his friend some notion of that gentleman's character. He had written to Mr. Talboys immediately after the disappearance of George, carefully wording his letter, which vaguely hinted at the writer's fear of some foul play in the mysterious business; and after the lapse of several weeks, he had received a formal epistle, in which Mr. Harcourt

Talboys expressly declared that he had washed his hands of all responsibility in his son George's affairs upon the young man's wedding-day; and that his absurd disappearance was only in character with his preposterous marriage. The writer of this fatherly letter added in a postscript that if Mr. George Talboys had any low design of alarming his friends by this pretended disappearance, and thereby playing on their feelings with a view to pecuniary advantage, he was most egregiously deceived in the character of those persons with whom he had to deal.

Robert Audley had answered this letter by a few indignant lines, informing Mr. Talboys that his son was scarcely likely to hide himself for the furtherance of any deep-laid design on the pockets of his relatives, as he had left twenty thousand pounds in his bankers' hands at the time of his disappearance. After despatching this letter, Robert had abandoned all thought of assistance from the man who, in the natural course of things, should have been most interested in George's fate; but now that he found himself

advancing every day some step nearer to the end that lay so darkly before him, his mind reverted to this heartlessly-indifferent Mr. Harcourt Talboys.

"I will run into Dorsetshire after I leave Southampton," he said, "and see this man. If *he* is content to let his son's fate rest a dark and cruel mystery to all who knew him—if he is content to go down to his grave uncertain to the last of this poor fellow's end—why should I try to unravel the tangled skein, to fit the pieces of the terrible puzzle, and gather together the stray fragments which when collected may make such a hideous whole? I will go to him and lay my darkest doubts freely before him. It will be for him to say what I am to do."

Robert Audley started by an early express for Southampton. The snow lay thick and white upon the pleasant country through which he went; and the young barrister had wrapped himself in so many comforters and railway rugs as to appear a perambulating mass of woollen goods rather than a living member of a learned pro-

fession. He looked gloomily out of the misty window, opaque with the breath of himself and an elderly Indian officer, who was his only companion, and watched the fleeting landscape, which had a certain phantom-like appearance in its shroud of snow. He wrapped himself in the vast folds of his railway rug with a peevish shiver, and felt inclined to quarrel with the destiny which compelled him to travel by an early train upon a pitiless winter's day.

"Who would have thought that I could have grown so fond of the fellow," he muttered, "or feel so lonely without him? I've a comfortable little fortune in the three per cents.; I'm heir-presumptive to my uncle's title; and I know of a certain dear little girl, who, as I think, would do her best to make me happy; but I declare that I would freely give up all and stand penniless in the world to-morrow, if this mystery could be satisfactorily cleared away, and George Talboys could stand by my side."

He reached Southampton between eleven and twelve o'clock, and walked across the platform,

with the snow drifting in his face, towards the pier and the lower end of the town. The clock of St. Michael's Church was striking twelve as he crossed the quaint old square in which that edifice stands, and groped his way through the narrow streets leading down to the water.

Mr. Maldon had established his slovenly household gods in one of those dreary thoroughfares which speculative builders love to raise upon some miserable fragment of waste ground hanging to the skirts of a prosperous town. Brigsome's Terrace was perhaps one of the most dismal blocks of building that was ever composed of brick and mortar since the first mason plied his trowel and the first architect drew his plan. The builder who had speculated in the ten dreary eight-roomed prison-houses had hung himself behind the parlour door of an adjacent tavern while the carcases were yet unfinished. The man who had bought the brick and mortar skeletons had gone through the Bankruptcy Court while the paper-hangers were still busy in Brigsome's Terrace, and had whitewashed his ceilings and himself simul-

taneously. Ill-luck and insolvency clung to the wretched habitations. The bailiff and the broker's man were as well known as the butcher and the baker to the noisy children who played upon the waste ground in front of the parlour windows. Solvent tenants were disturbed at unhallowed hours by the noise of ghostly furniture vans creeping stealthily away in the moonless night. Insolvent tenants openly defied the collector of the water-rate from their ten-roomed strongholds, and existed for weeks without any visible means of procuring that necessary fluid.

Robert Audley looked about him with a shudder as he turned from the water-side into this poverty-stricken locality. A child's funeral was leaving one of the houses as he approached, and he thought with a thrill of horror that if the little coffin had held George's son, he would have been in some measure responsible for the boy's death.

"The poor child shall not sleep another night in this wretched hovel," he thought, as he knocked at the door of Mr. Maldon's house. "He is the

legacy of my lost friend, and it shall be my business to secure his safety."

A slipshod servant girl opened the door and looked at Mr. Audley rather suspiciously as she asked him, very much through her nose, what he pleased to want. The door of the little sitting-room was ajar, and Robert could hear the clattering of knives and forks and the childish voice of little George prattling gaily. He told the servant that he had come from London, that he wanted to see Master Talboys, and that he would announce himself; and walking past her, without further ceremony, he opened the door of the parlour. The girl stared at him aghast as he did this; and, as if struck by some sudden conviction, threw her apron over her head and ran out into the snow. She darted across the waste ground, plunged into a narrow alley, and never drew breath till she found herself upon the threshold of a certain tavern called the Coach and Horses, and much affected by Mr. Maldon. The lieutenant's faithful retainer had taken Robert Audley for some new and determined collector of poor's rates—re-

jecting that gentleman's account of himself as an artful fiction devised for the destruction of parochial defaulters—and had hurried off to give her master timely warning of the enemy's approach.

When Robert entered the sitting-room he was surprised to find little George seated opposite to a woman who was doing the honours of a shabby repast, spread upon a dirty tablecloth, and flanked by a pewter beer measure. The woman rose as Robert entered, and curtsied very humbly to the young barrister. She looked about fifty years of age, and was dressed in rusty widow's weeds. Her complexion was insipidly fair, and the two smooth bands of hair beneath her cap were of that sunless flaxen hue which generally accompanies pink cheeks and white eyelashes. She had been a rustic beauty perhaps in her time, but her features, although tolerably regular in their shape, had a mean pinched look, as if they had been made too small for her face. This defect was peculiarly noticeable in her mouth, which was an obvious misfit for the set of teeth it contained. She smiled as she curtsied to Mr. Robert Audley, and her smile,

which laid bare the greater part of this set of square, hungry-looking teeth, by no means added to the beauty of her personal appearance.

"Mr. Maldon is not at home, sir," she said, with insinuating civility; "but if it's for the water-rate, he requested me to say that——"

She was interrupted by little George Talboys, who scrambled down from the high chair upon which he had been perched, and ran to Robert Audley.

"I know you," he said; "you came to Ventnor with the big gentleman, and you came here once, and you gave me some money, and I gave it to granpa to take care of, and granpa kept it, and he always does."

Robert Audley took the boy in his arms, and carried him to a little table in the window.

"Stand there, Georgey," he said, "I want to have a good look at you."

He turned the boy's face to the light, and pushed the brown curls off his forehead with both hands.

"You're growing more like your father every

day, Georgey; and you're growing quite a man, too," he said; "would you like to go to school?"

"Oh, yes, please, I should like it very much," the boy answered, eagerly. "I went to school at Miss Pevins's once—day-school, you know—round the corner in the next street; but I caught the measles, and granpa wouldn't let me go any more, for fear I should catch the measles again; and granpa wont let me play with the little boys in the street, because they're rude boys; he said blackguard boys; but he said I musn't say blackguard boys, because it's naughty. He says damn and devil, but he says he may because he's old. I shall say damn and devil when I'm old; and I should like to go to school, please, and I can go to-day, if you like; Mrs. Plowson will get my frocks ready, won't you, Mrs. Plowson?"

"Certainly, Master Georgey, if your grandpapa wishes it," the woman answered, looking rather uneasily at Mr. Robert Audley.

"What on earth is the matter with this

woman?" thought Robert, as he turned from the boy to the fair-haired widow, who was edging herself slowly towards the table upon which little George Talboys stood talking to his guardian. "Does she still take me for a tax-collector with inimical intentions towards these wretched goods and chattels; or can the cause of her fidgetty manner lie deeper still? That's scarcely likely though; for whatever secrets Lieutenant Maldon may have, it's not very probable that this woman has any knowledge of them."

Mrs. Plowson had edged herself close to the little table by this time, and was making a stealthy descent upon the boy, when Robert turned sharply round.

"What are you going to do with the child?" he said.

"I was only going to take him away to wash his pretty face, sir, and smooth his hair," answered the woman, in the same insinuating tone in which she had spoken of the water-rate. "You don't see him to any advantage,

sir, while his precious face is dirty. I won't be five minutes making him as neat as a new pin."

She had her long thin arms about the boy as she spoke, and she was evidently going to carry him off bodily, when Robert stopped her.

"I'd rather see him as he is, thank you," he said. "My time in Southampton isn't very long, and I want to hear all that the little man can tell me."

The little man crept closer to Robert, and looked confidingly into the barrister's grey eyes.

"I like you very much," he said. "I was frightened of you when you came before, because I was shy. I am not shy now—I am nearly six years old."

Robert patted the boy's head encouragingly, but he was not looking at little George; he was watching the fair-haired widow, who had moved to the window, and was looking out at the patch of waste ground.

"You're rather fidgetty about some one, ma'am, I'm afraid," said Robert.

She coloured violently as the barrister made this remark, and answered him in a confused manner.

"I was looking for Mr. Maldon, sir," she said; "he'll be so disappointed if he doesn't see you."

"You know who I am, then?"

"No, sir, but——"

The boy interrupted her by dragging a little jewelled watch from his bosom and showing it to Robert.

"This is the watch the pretty lady gave me," he said. "I've got it now—but I haven't had it long, because the jeweller who cleans it is an idle man, granpa says, and always keeps it such a long time; and granpa says it will have to be cleaned again, because of the taxes. He always takes it to be cleaned when there's taxes—but he says, if he were to lose it, the pretty lady would give me another. Do you know the pretty lady?"

"No, Georgey; but tell me all about her."

Mrs. Plowson made another descent upon the

boy. She was armed with a pocket-handkerchief this time, and displayed great anxiety about the state of little George's nose, but Robert warded off the dreaded weapon, and drew the child away from his tormentor.

"The boy will do very well, ma'am," he said, "if you'll be good enough to let him alone for five minutes. Now, Georgey, suppose you sit on my knee, and tell me all about the pretty lady."

The child clambered from the table on to Mr. Audley's knees, assisting his descent by a very unceremonious manipulation of his guardian's coat collar.

"I'll tell you all about the pretty lady," he said, "because I like you very much. Grandpa told me not to tell anybody, but I'll tell you, you know, because I like you, and because you're going to take me to school. The pretty lady came here one night—long ago—oh, so long ago," said the boy, shaking his head, with a face whose solemnity was expressive of some prodigious lapse of time. "She came when I was not nearly so big as I am

now—and she came at night—after I'd gone to bed, and she came up into my room, and sat upon the bed, and cried—and she left the watch under my pillow, and she——Why do you make faces at me, Mrs. Plowson? I may tell this gentleman," Georgey added, suddenly addressing the widow, who was standing behind Robert's shoulder.

Mrs. Plowson mumbled some confused apology to the effect that she was afraid Master George was troublesome.

"Suppose you wait till I say so, ma'am, before you stop the little fellow's mouth," said Robert Audley, sharply. "A suspicious person might think, from your manner, that Mr. Maldon and you had some conspiracy between you, and that you were afraid of what the boy's talk may let slip."

He rose from his chair, and looked full at Mrs. Plowson as he said this. The fair-haired widow's face was as white as her cap when she tried to answer him, and her pale lips were so dry that she was obliged to wet them with her tongue before the words would come.

The little boy relieved her embarrassment.

"Don't be cross, Mrs. Plowson," he said. "Mrs. Plowson is very kind to me. Mrs. Plowson is Matilda's mother. You didn't know Matilda. Poor Matilda was always crying; she was ill, she——"

The boy was stopped by the sudden appearance of Mr. Maldon, who stood on the threshold of the parlour-door, staring at Robert Audley with a half-drunken, half-terrified aspect, scarcely consistent with the dignity of a retired naval officer. The servant girl, breathless and panting, stood close behind her master. Early in the day though it was, the old man's speech was thick and confused, as he addressed himself fiercely to Mrs. Plowson.

"You're a prett' creature to call yoursel' 'sensible woman!" he said. "Why don't you take th' chile 'way, er wash 's face? D'yer want to ruin me? D'yer want to 'stroy me? Take th' chile 'way! Mr. Audley, sir, I'm ver' glad to see yer; ver 'appy to 'ceive yer in m' humbl' 'bode," the old man added, with tipsy politeness, dropping

into a chair as he spoke, and trying to look steadily at his unexpected visitor.

"Whatever this man's secrets are," thought Robert, as Mrs. Plowson hustled little George Talboys out of the room, "that woman has no unimportant share of them. Whatever the mystery may be, it grows darker and thicker at every step; but I try in vain to draw back or to stop short upon the road, for a stronger hand than my own is pointing the way to my lost friend's unknown grave."

CHAPTER III.

LITTLE GEORGEY LEAVES HIS OLD HOME.

"I AM going to take your grandson away with me, Mr. Maldon," Robert said, gravely, as Mrs. Plowson retired with her young charge.

The old man's drunken imbecility was slowly clearing away, like the heavy mists of a London fog, through which the feeble sunshine struggles dimly to appear. The very uncertain radiance of Lieutenant Maldon's intellect took a considerable time in piercing the hazy vapours of rum-and-water; but the flickering light at last faintly glimmered athwart the clouds, and the old man screwed his poor wits to the sticking-point.

"Yes, yes," he said, feebly; "take the boy away from his poor old grandfather. I always thought so."

"You always thought that I should take him away?" asked Robert, scrutinising the half-

drunken countenance with a searching glance. "Why did you think so, Mr. Maldon?"

The fogs of intoxication got the better of the light of sobriety for a moment, and the lieutenant answered vaguely:

"Thought so?—'cause I thought so."

Meeting the young barrister's impatient frown, he made another effort, and the light glimmered again.

"Because I thought you or his father would fetch 'm away."

"When I was last in this house, Mr. Maldon, you told me that George Talboys had sailed for Australia."

"Yes, yes—I know, I know," the old man answered, confusedly, shuffling his scanty limp grey hairs with his two wandering hands—"I know; but he might have come back—mightn't he? He was restless, and—and—queer in his mind, perhaps, sometimes. He might have come back."

He repeated this two or three times, in feeble, muttering tones; groping about on the littered

mantel-piece for a dirty-looking clay-pipe, and filling and lighting it with hands that trembled violently.

Robert Audley watched those poor withered, tremulous fingers dropping shreds of tobacco upon the hearth-rug, and scarcely able to kindle a lucifer for their unsteadiness. Then walking once or twice up and down the little room, he left the old man to take a few puffs from the great consoler.

Presently he turned suddenly upon the half-pay lieutenant with a dark solemnity in his handsome face.

"Mr. Maldon," he said, slowly, watching the effect of every syllable as he spoke, "George Talboys never sailed for Australia—that I know. More than this, he never came to Southampton; and the lie you told me on the 8th of last September was dictated to you by the telegraphic message which you received on that day."

The dirty clay-pipe dropped from the tremulous hand, and shivered against the iron fender, but the old man made no effort to find a fresh one;

he sat trembling in every limb, and looking, Heaven knows how piteously, at Robert Audley.

"The lie was dictated to you, and you repeated your lesson. But you no more saw George Talboys here on the 7th of September than I see him in this room now. You thought you had burnt the telegraphic message, but you had only burnt a part of it—the remainder is in my possession."

Lieutenant Maldon was quite sober now.

"What have I done?" he murmured, helplessly. "O, my God! what have I done?"

"At two o'clock on the 7th of September last," continued the pitiless, accusing voice, "George Talboys was seen, alive and well, at a house in Essex."

Robert paused to see the effect of these words. They had produced no change in the old man. He still sat trembling from head to foot, and staring with the fixed and stolid gaze of some helpless wretch, whose every sense is gradually becoming numbed by terror.

"At two o'clock on that day," repeated Robert Audley, "my poor friend was seen, alive and well,

at ——, at the house of which I speak. From that hour to this I have never been able to hear that he has been seen by any living creature. I have taken such steps as *must* have resulted in procuring the information of his whereabouts, were he alive. I have done this patiently and carefully—at first, even hopefully. Now I know that he is dead."

Robert Audley had been prepared to witness some considerable agitation in the old man's manner, but he was not prepared for the terrible anguish, the ghastly terror, which convulsed Mr. Maldon's haggard face as he uttered the last word.

"No, no, no, no," reiterated the lieutenant, in a shrill, half-screaming voice; "no, no! For God's sake, don't say that! Don't think it—don't let *me* think it—don't let me dream of it; Not dead—anything but dead! Hiding away, perhaps—bribed to keep out of the way, perhaps! but not dead—not dead—not dead!"

He cried these words aloud, like one beside himself; beating his hands upon his grey head,

and rocking backwards and forwards in his chair. His feeble hands trembled no longer—they were strengthened by some convulsive force that gave them a new power.

"I believe," said Robert, in the same solemn, relentless voice, "that my friend never left Essex; and I believe that he died on the 7th of September last."

The wretched old man, still beating his hands amongst his thin grey hair, slid from his chair to the ground, and grovelled at Robert's feet.

"Oh! no, no—for God's sake, no!" he shrieked hoarsely. "No! you don't know what you say—you don't know what you ask me to think—you don't know what your words mean!"

"I know their weight and value only too well—as well as I see you do, Mr. Maldon. God help us!"

"Oh, what am I doing? what am I doing?" muttered the old man, feebly; then raising himself from the ground with an effort, he drew himself to his full height, and said, in a manner which was new to him, and which was not

without a certain dignity of its own—that dignity which must always be attached to unutterable misery, in whatever form it may appear—he said, gravely :—

"You have no right to come here and terrify a man who has been drinking; and who is not quite himself. You have no right to do it, Mr. Audley. Even the—the officer, sir, who—who—" He did not stammer, but his lips trembled so violently that his words seemed to be shaken into pieces by their motion. "The officer, I repeat, sir, who arrests a—a thief, or a—" He stopped to wipe his lips, and to still them if he could by doing so, which he could not. "A thief—or a murderer—" His voice died suddenly away upon the last word, and it was only by the motion of those trembling lips that Robert knew what he meant. "Gives him warning, sir, fair warning, that he may say nothing which shall commit himself—or—or—other people. The—the—law, sir, has that amount of mercy for a—a—suspected criminal. But you, sir, you—you come to my house, and you come at a time when—when—

contrary to my usual habits—which, as people will tell you, are sober—you come, and perceiving that I am not quite myself—you take—the—opportunity to—terrify me—and it is not right, sir—it is——"

Whatever he would have said died away into inarticulate gasps which seemed to choke him, and sinking into a chair, he dropped his face upon the table and wept aloud. Perhaps in all the dismal scenes of domestic misery which had been acted in those spare and dreary houses—in all the petty miseries, the burning shames, the cruel sorrows, the bitter disgraces which own poverty for their common father—there had never been such a scene as this. An old man hiding his face from the light of day, and sobbing aloud in his wretchedness. Robert Audley contemplated the painful picture with a hopeless and pitying face.

"If I had known this," he thought, "I might have spared him. It would have been better, perhaps, to have spared him."

The shabby room, the dirt, the confusion, the

figure of the old man, with his grey head upon the soiled table-cloth, amid the muddled *débris* of a wretched dinner, grew blurred before the sight of Robert Audley as he thought of another man, as old as this one, but, ah, how widely different in every other quality! who might come by-and-by to feel the same, or even a worse anguish, and to shed, perhaps, yet bitterer tears. The moment in which the tears rose to his eyes and dimmed the piteous scene before him, was long enough to take him back to Essex, and to show him the image of his uncle, stricken by agony and shame.

"Why do I go on with this?" he thought; "how pitiless I am, and how relentlessly I am carried on. It is not myself; it is the hand which is beckoning me further and further upon the dark road whose end I dare not dream of."

He thought this, and a hundred times more than this, while the old man sat with his face still hidden, wrestling with his anguish, but without power to keep it down.

"Mr. Maldon," Robert Audley said, after a

pause, "I do not ask you to forgive me for what I have brought upon you, for the feeling is strong within me that it must have come to you sooner or later—if not through me, through some one else. There are——" He stopped for a moment, hesitating. The sobbing did not cease; it was sometimes low, sometimes loud, bursting out with fresh violence, or dying away for an instant, but never ceasing. "There are some things which, as people say, cannot be hidden. I think there is truth in that common saying which had its origin in that old worldly wisdom which people gathered from experience and not from books. If—if I were content to let my friend rest in his hidden grave, it is but likely that some stranger, who had never heard the name of George Talboys, might fall by the remotest accident upon the secret of his death. To-morrow, perhaps; or ten years hence; or in another generation, when the—the hand that wronged him is as cold as his own. If I *could* let the matter rest; if—if I could leave England for ever, and purposely fly from the possibility of ever coming across another

clue to the secret, I would do it—I would gladly, thankfully do it—but I *cannot!* A hand which is stronger than my own beckons me on. I wish to take no base advantage of you, less than of all other people; but I must go on; I must go on. If there is any warning you would give to any one, give it. If the secret towards which I am travelling day by day, hour by hour, involves any one in whom you have an interest; let that person fly before I come to the end. Let them leave this country; let them leave all who know them—all whose peace their wickedness has endangered; let them go away—they shall not be pursued. But if they slight your warning—if they try to hold their present position in defiance of what it will be in your power to tell them—let them beware of me, for when the hour comes, I swear that I will not spare them."

The old man looked up for the first time, and wiped his wrinkled face upon a ragged silk handkerchief.

"I declare to you that I do not understand you," he said. "I solemnly declare to you that

I cannot understand; and I do not believe that George Talboys is dead."

"I would give ten years of my own life if I could see him alive," answered Robert, sadly. "I am sorry for you, Mr. Maldon—I am sorry for all of us."

"I do not believe that my son-in-law is dead," said the lieutenant; "I do not believe that the poor lad is dead."

He endeavoured in a feeble manner to show to Robert Audley that his wild outburst of anguish had been caused by his grief for the loss of George Talboys; but the pretence was miserably shallow.

Mrs. Plowson re-entered the room, leading little Georgey, whose face shone with that brilliant polish which yellow soap and friction can produce upon the human countenance.

"Dear heart alive!" exclaimed Mrs. Plowson, "what has the poor old gentleman been taking on about? We could hear him in the passage, sobbin' awful."

Little George crept up to his grandfather and

smoothed the wet and wrinkled face with his pudgy hand.

"Don't cry, gran'pa," he said, "don't cry. You shall have my watch to be cleaned, and the kind jeweller shall lend you the money to pay the taxman while he cleans the watch—I don't mind, gran'pa. Let's go to the jeweller—the jeweller in High-street, you know, with golden balls painted upon his door, to show that he comes from Lombar—Lombarshire," said the boy, making a dash at the name. "Come, gran'pa."

The little fellow took the jewelled toy from his bosom and made for the door, proud of being possessed of a talisman which he had seen so often made useful.

"There are wolves at Southampton," he said, with rather a triumphant nod to Robert Audley. "My gran'pa says when he takes my watch that he does it to keep the wolf from the door. Are there wolves where you live?"

The young barrister did not answer the child's question, but stopped him as he was dragging his grandfather towards the door.

"Your grandpapa does not want the watch to-day, Georgey," he said, gravely.

"Why is he sorry, then?" asked Georgey, naïvely; "when he wants the watch he is always sorry, and beats his poor forehead so"—the boy stopped to pantomime with his small fists—"and says that she—the pretty lady, I think, he means —uses him very hard, and that he can't keep the wolf from the door; and then I say, 'Gran'pa, have the watch;' and then he takes me in his arms and says, 'Oh, my blessed angel! how can I rob my blessed angel?' and then he cries, but not like to-day—not loud, you know; only tears running down his poor cheeks; not so that you could hear him in the passage."

Painful as the child's prattle was to Robert Audley, it seemed a relief to the old man. He did not hear the boy's talk, but walked two or three times up and down the little room and smoothed his rumpled hair and suffered his cravat to be arranged by Mrs. Plowson, who seemed very anxious to find out the cause of his agitation.

"Poor dear old gentleman," she said, looking at Robert. "What has happened to upset him so?"

"His son-in-law is dead," answered Mr. Audley, fixing his eyes upon Mrs. Plowson's sympathetic face. "He died within a year and a half after the death of Helen Talboys, who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard."

The face into which he was looking changed very slightly; but the eyes that had been looking at his shifted away as he spoke, and once more Mrs. Plowson was obliged to moisten her white lips with her tongue before she answered him.

"Poor Mr. Talboys dead!" she said; "that is bad news indeed, sir."

Little George looked wistfully up at his guardian's face as this was said.

"Who's dead?" he said. "George Talboys is my name. Who's dead?"

"Another person whose name is Talboys, Georgey."

"Poor person! Will he go to the pit-hole?"

The boy had that common notion of death

which is generally imparted to children by their wise elders, and which always leads the infant mind to the open grave, but rarely carries it any higher.

"I should like to *see* him put in the pit-hole," Georgey remarked, after a pause. He had attended several infant funerals in the neighbourhood, and was considered valuable as a mourner on account of his interesting appearance. He had come, therefore, to look upon the ceremony of interment as a solemn festivity; in which cake and wine and a carriage drive were the leading features.

"You have no objection to my taking Georgey away with me, Mr. Maldon?" asked Robert Audley.

The old man's agitation had very much subsided by this time. He had found another pipe stuck behind the tawdry frame of the looking-glass, and was trying to light it with a bit of twisted newspaper.

"You do not object, Mr. Maldon?"

"No, sir—no, sir; you are his guardian, and

you have a right to take him where you please. He has been a very great comfort to me in my lonely old age; but I have been prepared to lose him. I—I—may not have always done my duty to him, sir, in—in the way of schooling and—and boots. The number of boots which boys of his age wear out, sir, is not easily realised by the mind of a young man like yourself; he has been kept away from school, perhaps, sometimes, and has occasionally worn shabby boots when our funds have got low; but he has not been unkindly treated. No, sir; if you were to question him for a week, I don't think you'd hear that his poor old grandfather ever said a harsh word to him."

Upon this, Georgey, perceiving the distress of his old protector, set up a terrible howl, and declared that he would never leave him.

"Mr. Maldon," said Robert Audley, with a tone which was half-mournful, half-compassionate, "when I looked at my position last night, I did not believe that I could ever come to think it more painful than I thought it then. I can only

say—God have mercy upon us all. I feel it my duty to take the child away; but I shall take him straight from your house to the best school in Southampton; and I give you my honour that I will extort nothing from his innocent simplicity which can in any manner——I mean," he said, breaking off abruptly, "I mean this—I will not seek to come one step nearer the secret through him. I—I am not a detective officer, and I do not think that the most accomplished detective would like to get his information from a child."

The old man did not answer; he sat with his face shaded by his hand, and with his extinguished pipe between the listless fingers of the other.

"Take the boy away, Mrs. Plowson," he said, after a pause; "take him away and put his things on. He is going with Mr. Audley."

"Which I do say that it's not kind of the gentleman to take his poor grandpa's pet away," Mrs. Plowson exclaimed, suddenly, with respectful indignation.

"Hush, Mrs. Plowson," the old man answered, piteously; "Mr. Audley is the best judge. I—I —haven't many years to live; I shan't trouble anybody long."

The tears oozed slowly through the dirty fingers with which he shaded his bloodshot eyes as he said this.

"God knows, I never injured your friend, sir," he said by-and-by, when Mrs. Plowson and Georgey had returned, "nor ever wished him any ill. He was a good son-in-law to me—better than many a son. I never did him any wilful wrong, sir. I—I spent his money, perhaps, but I am sorry for it,—I am very sorry for it now. But I don't believe he is dead—no, sir, no, I don't believe it!" exclaimed the old man, dropping his hand from his eyes, and looking with new energy at Robert Audley. "I—I don't believe it, sir! How—how should he be dead?"

Robert did not answer this eager questioning. He shook his head mournfully, and walking to the little window looked out across a row of

straggling geraniums at the dreary patch of waste ground on which the children were at play.

Mrs. Plowson returned with little Georgey muffled in a coat and comforter, and Robert took the boy's hand.

"Say good-by to your grandpapa, Georgey."

The little fellow sprang towards the old man, and clinging about him, kissed the dirty tears from his faded cheeks.

"Don't be sorry for me, grandpa," he said; "I am going to school to learn to be a clever man, and I shall come home to see you and Mrs. Plowson, shan't I?" he added, turning to Robert.

"Yes, my dear, by-and-by."

"Take him away, sir—take him away," cried Mr. Maldon; "you are breaking my heart."

The little fellow trotted away contentedly at Robert's side. He was very well pleased at the idea of going to school, though he had been happy enough with his drunken old grandfather, who had always displayed a maudlin affection for the

pretty child, and had done his best to spoil Georgey, by letting him have his own way in everything; in consequence of which indulgence Master Talboys had acquired a taste for late hours, hot suppers of the most indigestible nature, and sips of rum-and-water from his grandfather's glass.

He communicated his sentiments upon many subjects to Robert Audley, as they walked to the Dolphin Hotel; but the barrister did not encourage him to talk.

It was no very difficult matter to find a good school in such a place as Southampton. Robert Audley was directed to a pretty house between the Bar and the Avenue, and leaving Georgey to the care of a good-natured waiter, who seemed to have nothing to do but to look out of the window, and whisk invisible dust off the brightly polished tables, the barrister walked up the High-street, towards Mr. Marchmont's academy for young gentlemen.

He found Mr. Marchmont a very sensible man, and he met a file of orderly-looking young gentle-

men walking townwards under the escort of a couple of ushers as he entered the house.

He told the schoolmaster that little George Talboys had been left in his charge by a dear friend, who had sailed for Australia some months before, and whom he believed to be dead. He confided him to Mr. Marchmont's especial care, and he further requested that no visitors should be admitted to see the boy, unless accredited by a letter from himself. Having arranged the matter in a very few business-like words, he returned to the hotel to fetch Georgey.

He found the little man on intimate terms with the idle waiter, who had been directing Master Georgey's attention to the different objects of interest in the High-street.

Poor Robert had about as much notion of the requirements of a child as he had of those of a white elephant. He had catered for silkworms, guinea-pigs, dormice, canary-birds, and dogs, without number, during his boyhood, but he had never been called upon to provide for a young person of five years old.

He looked back five-and-twenty years, and tried to remember his own diet at the age of five.

"I've a vague recollection of getting a good deal of bread and milk and boiled mutton," he thought; "and I've another vague recollection of not liking them. I wonder if this boy likes bread and milk and boiled mutton."

He stood pulling his thick moustache and staring thoughtfully at the child for some minutes before he could get any further.

"I dare say you're hungry, Georgey," he said, at last.

The boy nodded, and the waiter whisked some more invisible dust from the table, as a preparatory step towards laying a cloth.

"Perhaps you'd like some lunch?" Mr. Audley suggested, still pulling his moustache.

The boy burst out laughing.

"Lunch!" he cried. "Why, it's afternoon, and I've had my dinner."

Robert Audley felt himself brought to a standstill. What refreshment could he possibly pro-

vide for a boy who called it afternoon at three o'clock?

"You shall have some bread and milk, Georgey," he said, presently. "Waiter, bread-and-milk, and a pint of hock."

Master Talboys made a wry face.

"I never have bread-and-milk," he said; "I don't like it. I like what grandpa calls something savoury. I should like a veal cutlet. Grandpa told me he dined here once, and the veal cutets were lovely, grandpa said. Please may I have a veal cutlet, with egg and bread-crumb, you know, and some lemon-juice, you know?" he added to the waiter. "Grandpa knows the cook here. The cook's such a nice gentleman, and once gave me a shilling, when grandpa brought me here. The cook wears better clothes than grandpa—better than yours even," said Master Georgey, pointing to Robert's rough great-coat with a depreciatory nod.

Robert Audley stared aghast. How was he to deal with this epicure of five years old, who

rejected bread-and-milk and asked for veal cutlets?

"I'll tell you what I'll do with you, little Georgey," he exclaimed, after a pause—"*I'll give you a dinner.*"

The waiter nodded briskly.

"Upon my word, sir," he said, approvingly, "I think the little gentleman will know how to eat it."

"I'll give you a dinner, Georgey," repeated Robert—"a little Julienne, some stewed eels, a dish of cutlets, a bird, and a pudding. What do you say to that, Georgey?"

"I don't think the young gentleman will object to it when he sees it, sir," said the waiter. "Eels, Julienne, cutlets, bird, pudding—I'll go and tell the cook, sir. What time, sir?"

"Well, we'll say six, and Master Georgey will get to his new school by bedtime. You can contrive to amuse the child for this afternoon, I dare say. I have some business to settle, and shan't be able to take him out. I shall sleep here to-night. Good-by, Georgey; take care of your-

self, and try and get your appetite in order against six o'clock."

Robert Audley left the boy in charge of the idle waiter, and strolled down to the water-side, choosing that lonely bank which leads away under the mouldering walls of the town towards the little villages beside the narrowing river.

He had purposely avoided the society of the child, and he walked through the light drifting snow till the early darkness closed upon him.

He went back to the town, and made inquiries at the station about the trains for Dorsetshire.

"I shall start early to-morrow morning," he thought, "and see George's father before nightfall. I will tell him all—all but the interest which I take in—in the suspected person, and he shall decide what is next to be done."

Master Georgey did very good justice to the dinner which Robert had ordered. He drank Bass's pale ale to an extent which considerably alarmed his entertainer, and enjoyed himself amazingly, showing an appreciation of roast

pheasant and bread-sauce which was beyond his years. At eight o'clock a fly was brought out for his accommodation, and he departed in the highest spirits, with a sovereign in his pocket, and a letter from Robert to Mr. Marchmont, enclosing a cheque for the young gentleman's outfit.

"I'm glad I'm going to have new clothes," he said, as he bade Robert good-by; "for Mrs. Plowson has mended the old ones ever so many times. She can have them now for Billy."

"Who's Billy?" Robert asked, laughing at the boy's chatter.

"Billy is poor Matilda's little brother. He's a common boy, you know. Matilda was common, but she——"

But the flyman smacking his whip at this moment, the old horse jogged off, and Robert Audley heard no more of Matilda.

CHAPTER IV.

COMING TO A STANDSTILL.

Mr. Harcourt Talboys lived in a prim, square, red-brick mansion, within a mile of a little village called Grange Heath, in Dorsetshire. The prim, square, red-brick mansion stood in the centre of prim, square grounds, scarcely large enough to be called a park, too large to be called anything else—so neither the house nor the grounds had any name, and the estate was simply designated Squire Talboys'.

Perhaps Mr. Harcourt Talboys was the very last person in this world with whom it was possible to associate the homely, hearty, rural, old English title of squire. He neither hunted nor farmed. He had never worn crimson-pink, or top-boots in his life. A southerly wind and a cloudy sky were matters of supreme indifference to him, so long as they did not in any way interfere with his own

prim comforts; and he only cared for the state of the crops insomuch as involved the hazard of certain rents which he received for the farms upon his estate. He was a man of about fifty years of age, tall, straight, bony, and angular, with a square, pale face, light grey eyes, and scanty dark hair, brushed from either ear across a bald crown, and thus imparting to his physiognomy some faint resemblance to that of a terrier—a sharp, uncompromising, hard-headed terrier—a terrier not to be taken in by the cleverest dog-stealer who ever distinguished himself in his profession.

Nobody ever remembered getting upon what is popularly called the blind side of Harcourt Talboys. He was like his own square-built, northern-fronted, shelterless house. There were no shady nooks in his character into which one could creep for shelter from his hard daylight. He was all daylight. He looked at everything in the same broad glare of intellectual sunlight, and would see no softening shadows that might alter the sharp outlines of cruel facts, subduing them to beauty. I do not know if I express

what I mean, when I say that there were no curves in his character—that his mind ran in straight lines, never diverging to the right or the left to round off their pitiless angles. With him right was right and wrong was wrong. He had never in his merciless, conscientious life admitted the idea that circumstance might mitigate the blackness of wrong or weaken the force of right. He had cast off his only son because his only son had disobeyed him, and he was ready to cast off his only daughter at five minutes' notice for the same reason.

If this square-built, hard-headed man could be possessed of such a weakness as vanity, he was certainly vain of his hardness. He was vain of that inflexible squareness of intellect which made him the disagreeable creature that he was. He was vain of that unwavering obstinacy which no influence of love or pity had been ever known to bend from its remorseless purpose. He was vain of the negative force of a nature which had never known the weakness of the affections, or the strength which may be born of that very weakness.

If he had regretted his son's marriage, and the breach, of his own making, between himself and George, his vanity had been more powerful than his regret, and had enabled him to conceal it. Indeed, unlikely as it appears at the first glance that such a man as this could have been vain, I have little doubt that vanity was the centre from which radiated all the disagreeable lines in the character of Mr. Harcourt Talboys. I dare say Junius Brutus was vain, and enjoyed the approval of awe-stricken Rome when he ordered his son off for execution. Harcourt Talboys would have sent poor George from his presence between the reversed fasces of the lictors, and grimly relished his own agony. Heaven only knows how bitterly this hard man may have felt the separation between himself and his only son, or how much the more terrible the anguish might have been made by that unflinching self-conceit which concealed the torture.

"My son did me an unpardonable wrong by marrying the daughter of a drunken pauper," Mr. Talboys would answer to any one who had the temerity to speak to him about George, "and

from that hour I had no longer a son. I wish him no ill. He is simply dead to me. I am sorry for him, as I am sorry for his mother who died nineteen years ago. If you talk to me of him as you would talk of the dead, I shall be ready to hear you. If you speak of him as you would speak of the living, I must decline to listen."

I believe that Harcourt Talboys hugged himself upon the gloomy Roman grandeur of this speech, and that he would have liked to have worn a toga, and wrapped himself sternly in its folds, as he turned his back upon poor George's intercessor. George never in his own person made any effort to soften his father's verdict. He knew his father well enough to know that the case was hopeless.

"If I write to him, he will fold my letter with the envelope inside, and indorse it with my name and the date of its arrival," the young man would say, "and call everybody in the house to witness that it has not moved him to one softening recollection or one pitiful thought. He will stick to his resolution to his dying day. I dare say, if the truth were known, he is glad that his only

son has offended him and given him the opportunity of parading his Roman virtues."

George had answered his wife thus when she and her father had urged him to ask assistance from Harcourt Talboys.

"No, my darling," he would say conclusively. "It is very hard, perhaps, to be poor, but we will bear it. We won't go with pitiful faces to the stern father, and ask him to give us food and shelter, only to be refused in long Johnsonian sentences, and made a classical example of for the benefit of the neighbourhood. No, my pretty one; it is easy to starve, but it is difficult to stoop."

Perhaps poor Mrs. George did not agree very heartily to the first of these two propositions. She had no great fancy for starving, and she whimpered pitifully when the pretty pint bottles of champagne, with Cliquot's and Moet's brands upon their corks, were exchanged for sixpenny ale, procured by a slipshod attendant from the nearest beershop. George had been obliged to carry his own burden and lend a helping hand

with that of his wife, who had no idea of keeping her regrets or disappointments a secret.

"I thought dragoons were always rich," she used to say, peevishly. "Girls always want to marry dragoons; and tradespeople always want to serve dragoons; and hotel-keepers to entertain dragoons; and theatrical managers to be patronised by dragoons. Who could have ever expected that a dragoon would drink sixpenny ale, smoke horrid bird's-eye tobacco, and let his wife wear a shabby bonnet?"

If there were any selfish feeling displayed in such speeches as these, George Talboys had never discovered it. He had loved and believed in his wife from the first to the last hour of his brief married life. The love that is not blind is perhaps only a spurious divinity after all; for when Cupid takes the fillet from his eyes it is a fatally certain indication that he is preparing to spread his wings for a flight. George never forgot the hour in which he had first been bewitched by Lieutenant Maldon's pretty daughter, and however she might have changed, the image

which had charmed him then, unchanged and unchanging represented her in his heart.

Robert Audley left Southampton by a train which started before daybreak, and reached Wareham station early in the day. He hired a vehicle at Wareham to take him over to Grange Heath.

The snow had hardened upon the ground, and the day was clear and frosty, every object in the landscape standing in sharp outline against the cold blue sky. The horses' hoofs clattered upon the ice-bound road, the iron shoes striking on ground that was almost as iron as themselves. The wintry day bore some resemblance to the man to whom Robert was going. Like him, it was sharp, frigid, and uncompromising; like him, it was merciless to distress, and impregnable to the softening power of sunshine. It would accept no sunshine but such January radiance as would light up the bleak, bare country without brightening it; and thus resembled Harcourt Talboys, who took the sternest side of every truth, and declared loudly to the disbelieving world, that there never had been, and never could be, any other side.

Robert Audley's heart sank within him as the shabby hired vehicle stopped at a stern-looking barred fence, and the driver dismounted to open a broad iron gate, which swung back with a clanking noise and was caught by a great iron tooth planted in the ground, which snapped at the lowest bar of the gate as if it wanted to bite.

This iron gate opened into a scanty plantation of straight-limbed fir-trees that grew in rows and shook their sturdy winter foliage defiantly in the very teeth of the frosty breeze. A straight, gravelled carriage-drive ran between these straight trees across a smoothly-kept lawn to a square red-brick mansion, every window of which winked and glittered in the January sunlight, as if it had been that moment cleaned by some indefatigable housemaid.

I don't know whether Junius Brutus was a nuisance in his own house, but amongst other of his Roman virtues, Mr. Talboys owned an extreme aversion to disorder, and was the terror of every domestic in his establishment.

The windows winked and the flight of stone

steps glared in the sunlight, the prim garden walks were so freshly gravelled that they gave a sandy, gingery aspect to the place, reminding one unpleasantly of red hair. The lawn was chiefly ornamented with dark, wintry shrubs of a funereal aspect, which grew in beds that looked like problems in algebra; and the flight of stone steps leading to the square half-glass door of the hall was adorned with dark-green wooden tubs containing the same sturdy evergreens.

"If the man is anything like his house," Robert thought, "I don't wonder that poor George and he parted."

At the end of a scanty avenue the carriage-drive turned a sharp corner (it would have been made to describe a curve in any other man's grounds) and ran before the lower windows of the house. The flyman dismounted at the steps, ascended them, and rang a brass-handled bell, which flew back to its socket with an angry metallic snap, as if it had been insulted by the plebeian touch of the man's hand.

A man in black trousers and a striped linen

jacket, which was evidently fresh from the hands of the laundress, opened the door. Mr. Talboys was at home. Would the gentleman send in his card?

Robert waited in the hall while his card was taken to the master of the house.

The hall was large, lofty, and paved with stone. The panels of the oaken wainscot shone with the same uncompromising polish which was on every object within and without the red-bricked mansion.

Some people are so weak-minded as to affect pictures and statues. Mr. Harcourt Talboys was far too practical to indulge in any such foolish fancies. A barometer and an umbrella-stand were the only adornments of his entrance-hall.

Robert Audley looked at these while his name was being submitted to George's father.

The linen-jacketed servant returned presently. He was a spare, pale-faced man of almost forty, and had the appearance of having outlived every emotion to which humanity is subject.

"If you will step this way, sir," he said, "Mr. Talboys will see you, although he is at breakfast.

He begged me to state that he had imagined that everybody in Dorsetshire was acquainted with his breakfast-hour."

This was intended as a stately reproof to Mr. Robert Audley. It had, however, very small effect upon the young barrister. He merely lifted his eyebrows in placid deprecation of himself and everybody else.

"I don't belong to Dorsetshire," he said. "Mr. Talboys might have known that, if he'd done me the honour to exercise his powers of ratiocination. Drive on, my friend."

The emotionless man looked at Robert Audley with the vacant stare of unmitigated horror, and opening one of the heavy oak doors, led the way into a large dining-room furnished with the severe simplicity of an apartment which is meant to be ate in, but never lived in; and at the top of a table which would have accommodated eighteen persons, Robert beheld Mr. Harcourt Talboys.

Mr. Talboys was robed in a dressing-gown of grey cloth, fastened about his waist with a girdle. It was a severe-looking garment, and was perhaps

the nearest approach to a toga to be obtained within the range of modern costume. He wore a buff waistcoat, a stiffly starched cambric cravat, and a faultless shirt collar. The cold grey of his dressing-gown was almost the same as the cold grey of his eyes, and the pale buff of his waistcoat was the pale buff of his complexion.

Robert Audley had not expected to find Harcourt Talboys at all like George in manners or disposition, but he had expected to see some family likeness between the father and the son. There was none. It would have been impossible to imagine any one more unlike George than the author of his existence. Robert scarcely wondered at the cruel letter he had received from Mr. Talboys when he saw the writer of it. Such a man could scarcely have written otherwise.

There was a second person in the large room, towards whom Robert glanced after saluting Harcourt Talboys, doubtful how to proceed. This second person was a lady, who sat at the last of a range of four windows, employed with some needlework, the kind which is generally called

plain work, and with a large wicker basket, filled with calicoes and flannels, standing by her.

The whole length of the room divided this lady from Robert, but he could see that she was young, and that she was like George Talboys.

"His sister!" he thought in that one moment during which he ventured to glance away from the master of the house towards the female figure at the window. "His sister, no doubt. He was fond of her, I know. Surely, she is not utterly indifferent as to his fate?"

The lady half rose from her seat, letting her work, which was large and awkward, fall from her lap as she did so, and dropping a reel of cotton, which rolled away upon the polished oaken flooring beyond the margin of the Turkey carpet.

"Sit down, Clara," said the hard voice of Mr. Talboys.

That gentleman did not appear to address his daughter, nor had his face been turned towards her when she rose. It seemed as if he had known it by some social magnetism peculiar to himself; it seemed, as his servants were apt disrespectfully

to observe, as if he had eyes in the back of his head.

"Sit down, Clara," he repeated, "and keep your cotton in your workbox."

The lady blushed at this reproof, and stooped to look for the cotton. Mr. Robert Audley, who was unabashed by the stern presence of the master of the house, knelt on the carpet, found the reel, and restored it to its owner; Harcourt Talboys staring at the proceeding with an expression of supreme astonishment.

"Perhaps, Mr. ——, Mr. Robert Audley!" he said, looking at the card which he held between his finger and thumb, "perhaps when you have finished looking for reels of cotton, you will be good enough to tell me to what I owe the honour of this visit?"

He waved his well-shaped hand with a gesture which might have been admired in the stately John Kemble; and the servant understanding the gesture, brought forward a ponderous red morocco chair.

The proceeding was so slow and solemn, that

Robert had at first thought that something extraordinary was about to be done; but the truth dawned upon him at last, and he dropped into the massive chair.

"You may remain, Wilson," said Mr. Talboys, as the servant was about to withdraw; "Mr. Audley would perhaps like coffee."

Robert had eaten nothing that morning, but he glanced at the long expanse of dreary tablecloth, the silver tea and coffee equipage, the stiff splendour and the very little appearance of any substantial entertainment, and he declined Mr. Talboys' invitation.

"Mr. Audley will not take coffee, Wilson," said the master of the house. "You may go."

The man bowed and retired, opening and shutting the door as cautiously as if he were taking a liberty in doing it at all, or as if the respect due to Mr. Talboys demanded his walking straight through the oaken panel like a ghost in a German story.

Mr. Harcourt Talboys sat with his grey eyes fixed severely on his visitor, his elbows on the red

morocco arms of his chair, and his finger-tips joined. It was the attitude in which, had he been Junius Brutus, he would have sat at the trial of his son. Had Robert Audley been easily to be embarrassed, Mr. Talboys might have succeeded in making him feel so: as he would have sat with perfect tranquillity upon an open gunpowder barrel lighting his cigar, he was not at all disturbed upon this occasion. The father's dignity seemed a very small thing to him when he thought of the possible causes of the son's disappearance.

"I wrote to you some time since, Mr. Talboys," he said quietly, when he saw that he was expected to open the conversation.

Harcourt Talboys bowed. He knew that it was of his lost son that Robert came to speak. Heaven grant that his icy stoicism was the paltry affectation of a vain man, rather than the utter heartlessness which Robert thought it. He bowed across his finger-tips at his visitor. The trial had begun, and Junius Brutus was enjoying himself.

"I received your communication, Mr. Audley,"

he said. "It is endorsed amongst other business letters: it was duly answered."

"That letter concerned your son."

There was a little rustling noise at the window where the lady sat, as Robert said this: he looked at her almost instantaneously, but she did not seem to have stirred. She was not working, but she was perfectly quiet.

"She's as heartless as her father, I expect, though she is like George," thought Mr. Audley.

"Your letter concerned the person who was once my son, perhaps, sir," said Harcourt Talboys; "I must ask you to remember that I have no longer a son."

"You have no reason to remind me of that, Mr. Talboys," answered Robert, gravely; "I remember it only too well. I have fatal reason to believe that you have no longer a son. I have bitter cause to think that he is dead."

It may be that Mr. Talboys' complexion faded to a paler shade of buff as Robert said this; but he only elevated his bristling grey eyebrows and shook his head gently.

"No," he said, "no, I assure you, no."

"I believe that George Talboys died in the month of September."

The girl who had been addressed as Clara, sat with her work primly folded upon her lap, and her hands lying clasped together on her work, and never stirred when Robert spoke of his friend's death. He could not distinctly see her face, for she was seated at some distance from him, and with her back to the window.

"No, no, I assure you," repeated Mr. Talboys, "you labour under a sad mistake."

"You believe that I am mistaken in thinking your son dead?" asked Robert.

"Most certainly," replied Mr. Talboys, with a smile, expressive of the serenity of wisdom. "Most certainly, my dear sir. The disappearance was a very clever trick, no doubt, but it was not sufficiently clever to deceive me. You must permit me to understand this matter a little better than you, Mr. Audley, and you must also permit me to assure you of three things. In the first place, your friend is not dead. In the second

place, he is keeping out of the way for the purpose of alarming me, of trifling with my feelings as a —as a man who was once his father, and of ultimately obtaining my forgiveness. In the third place, he will not obtain that forgiveness, however long he may please to keep out of the way; and he would therefore act wisely by returning to his ordinary residence and avocations without delay."

"Then you imagine him to purposely hide himself from all who know him, for the purpose of——?"

"For the purpose of influencing *me*," exclaimed Mr. Talboys, who taking a stand upon his own vanity, traced every event in life from that one centre, and resolutely declined to look at it from any other point of view. "For the purpose of influencing me. He knew the inflexibility of my character; to a certain degree he was acquainted with me, and he knew that all ordinary attempts at softening my decision, or moving me from the fixed purpose of my life, would fail. He therefore tried extraordinary means; he has kept out of the way in order to alarm me; and when after

due time he discovers that he has not alarmed me, he will return to his old haunts. When he does so," said Mr. Talboys, rising to sublimity, "I will forgive him. Yes, sir, I will forgive him. I shall say to him: You have attempted to deceive me, and I have shown you that I am not to be deceived; you have tried to frighten me, and I have convinced you that I am not to be frightened; you did not believe in my generosity, I will show you that I can be generous."

Harcourt Talboys delivered himself of these superb periods with a studied manner, that showed they had been carefully composed long ago.

Robert Audley sighed as he heard them.

"Heaven grant that you may have an opportunity of saying this to your son, sir," he answered sadly. "I am very glad to find that you are willing to forgive him, but I fear that you will never see him again upon this earth. I have a great deal to say to you upon this—this sad subject, Mr. Talboys; but I would rather say it to you alone," he added, glancing at the lady in the window.

"My daughter knows my ideas upon this subject, Mr. Audley," said Harcourt Talboys; "there is no reason why she should not hear all you have to say. Miss Clara Talboys, Mr. Robert Audley," he added, waving his hand majestically.

The young lady bent her head in recognition of Robert's bow.

"Let her hear it," he thought. "If she has so little feeling as to show no emotion upon such a subject, let her hear the worst I have to tell."

There was a few minutes' pause, during which Robert took some papers from his pocket; amongst them the document which he had written immediately after George's disappearance.

"I shall require all your attention, Mr. Talboys," he said, "for that which I have to disclose to you is of a very painful nature. Your son was my very dear friend—dear to me for many reasons. Perhaps most of all dear, because I had known him and been with him through the great trouble of his life; and because he stood comparatively alone in the world—cast off by you,

who should have been his best friend, bereft of the only woman he had ever loved."

"The daughter of a drunken pauper," Mr. Talboys remarked, parenthetically.

"Had he died in his bed, as I sometimes thought he would," continued Robert Audley, "of a broken heart, I should have mourned for him very sincerely, even though I had closed his eyes with my own hands, and had seen him laid in his quiet resting-place. I should have grieved for my old school-fellow, and for the companion who had been dear to me. But the grief would have been a very small one compared to that which I feel now, believing, as I do only too firmly, that my poor friend has been murdered."

"Murdered!"

The father and daughter simultaneously repeated the horrible word. The father's face changed to a ghastly duskiness of hue; the daughter's face dropped upon her clasped hands, and was never lifted again throughout the interview.

"Mr. Audley, you are mad!" exclaimed Harcourt Talboys; "you are mad, or else you are

commissioned by your friend to play upon my feelings. I protest against this proceeding as a conspiracy, and I—I revoke my intended forgiveness of the person who was once my son."

He was himself again as he said this. The blow had been a sharp one, but its effect had been momentary.

"It is far from my wish to alarm you unnecessarily, sir," answered Robert. "Heaven grant that you may be right and I wrong. I pray for it, but I cannot think it—I cannot even hope it. I come to you for advice. I will state to you plainly and dispassionately the circumstances which have aroused my suspicions. If you say those suspicions are foolish and unfounded, I am ready to submit to your better judgment. I will leave England; and I abandon my search for the evidence wanting to—to confirm my fears. If you say go on, I will go on."

Nothing could be more gratifying to the vanity of Mr. Harcourt Talboys than this appeal. He declared himself ready to listen to all that Robert

might have to say, and ready to assist him to the uttermost of his power.

He laid some stress upon this last assurance, deprecating the value of his advice with an affectation that was as transparent as his vanity itself.

Robert Audley drew his chair nearer to that of Mr. Talboys, and commenced a minutely-detailed account of all that had happened to George from the time of his arrival in England to the hour of his disappearance, as well as all that had occurred since his disappearance in any way touching upon that particular subject. Harcourt Talboys listened with demonstrative attention, now and then interrupting the speaker to ask some magisterial kind of question. Clara Talboys never once lifted her face from her clasped hands.

The hands of the clock pointed to a quarter past eleven when Robert began his story. The clock struck twelve as he finished.

He had carefully suppressed the names of his uncle and his uncle's wife in relating the circumstances in which they had been concerned.

"Now, sir," he said, when the story had been

told, "I await your decision. You have heard my reasons for coming to this terrible conclusion. In what manner do those reasons influence you?"

"They do not in any way turn me from my previous opinion," answered Mr. Harcourt Talboys, with the unreasoning pride of an obstinate man. "I still think, as I thought before, that my son is alive, and that his disappearance is a conspiracy against myself. I decline to become the victim of that conspiracy."

"And you tell me to stop?" asked Robert, solemnly.

"I tell you only this:—If you go on, you go on for your own satisfaction, not for mine. I see nothing in what you have told me to alarm me for the safety of —— your friend."

"So be it, then!" exclaimed Robert, suddenly; "from this moment I wash my hands of this business. From this moment the purpose of my life shall be to forget it."

He rose as he spoke, and took his hat from the table on which he had placed it. He looked at Clara Talboys. Her attitude had never changed

since she had dropped her face upon her hands. "Good morning, Mr. Talboys," he said gravely. "God grant that you are right. God grant that I am wrong. But I fear a day will come when you will have reason to regret your apathy respecting the untimely fate of your only son."

He bowed gravely to Mr. Harcourt Talboys and to the lady, whose face was hidden by her hands.

He lingered for a moment looking at Miss Talboys, thinking that she would look up, that she would make some sign, or show some desire to detain him.

Mr. Talboys rang for the emotionless servant, who led Robert off to the hall door with the solemnity of manner which would have been in perfect keeping had he been leading him to execution.

"She is like her father," thought Mr. Audley, as he glanced for the last time at the drooping head. "Poor George, you had need of one friend in this world, for you have had very few to love you."

CHAPTER V.

CLARA.

Robert Audley found the driver asleep upon the box of his lumbering vehicle. He had been entertained with beer of so hard a nature, as to induce temporary strangulation in the daring imbiber thereof, and he was very glad to welcome the return of his fare. The old white horse, who looked as if he had been foaled in the year in which the carriage had been built, and seemed, like the carriage, to have outlived the fashion, was as fast asleep as his master, and woke up with a jerk as Robert came down the stony flight of steps, attended by his executioner, who waited respectfully till Mr. Audley had entered the vehicle and been turned off.

The horse, roused by a smack of his driver's whip, and a shake of the shabby reins, crawled off in a semi-somnambulent state, and Robert,

with his hat very much over his eyes, thought of his missing friend.

He had played in these stiff gardens, and under these dreary firs, years ago, perhaps—if it were possible for the most frolicsome youth to be playful within the range of Mr. Harcourt Talboys' hard grey eyes. He had played beneath these dark trees, perhaps, with the sister who had heard of his fate to-day without a tear. Robert Audley looked at the rigid primness of the orderly grounds, wondering how George could have grown up in such a place to be the frank, generous, careless friend whom he had known. How was it that with his father perpetually before his eyes, he had not grown up after the father's disagreeable model, to be a nuisance to his fellowmen? How was it? Because we have Some One higher than our parents to thank for the souls which make us great or small; and because, while family noses and family chins may descend in orderly sequence from father to son, from grandsire to grandchild, as the fashion of the fading flowers of one year are reproduced in the

budding blossoms of the next, the spirit, more subtle that the wind which blows among those flowers, independent of all earthly rule, owns no order but the harmonious Law of God.

"Thank God!" thought Robert Audley—"thank God! it is over. My poor friend must rest in his unknown grave; and I shall not be the means of bringing disgrace upon those I love. It will come, perhaps, sooner or later, but it will not come through me. The crisis is past, and I am free."

He felt an unutterable relief in this thought. His generous nature revolted at the office into which he had found himself drawn—the office of spy; the collector of damning facts that led on to horrible deductions.

He drew a long breath—a sigh of relief at his release. It was all over now.

The fly was crawling out of the gate of the plantation as he thought this, and he stood up in the vehicle to look back at the dreary fir-trees, the gravel paths, the smooth grass, and the great desolate-looking, red-brick mansion.

He was startled by the appearance of a woman

running, almost flying, along the carriage-drive by which he had come, and waving a handkerchief in her uplifted hand.

He stared at this singular apparition for some moments in silent wonder, before he was able to reduce his stupefaction into words.

"Is it *me* the flying female wants?" he exclaimed at last. "You'd better stop, perhaps," he added to the flyman. "It is an age of eccentricity, an abnormal era of the world's history. She may want me. Very likely I left my pocket-handkerchief behind me, and Mr. Talboys has sent this person with it. Perhaps I'd better get out and go and meet her. It's civil to send my handkerchief."

Mr. Robert Audley deliberately descended from the fly, and walked slowly towards the hurrying female figure, which gained upon him rapidly.

He was rather short-sighted, and it was not until she came very near to him that he saw who she was.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "it's Miss Talboys."

It was Miss Talboys, flushed and breathless, with a woollen shawl over her head.

Robert Audley now saw her face clearly for the first time, and he saw that she was very handsome. She had brown eyes, like George's, a pale complexion (she had been flushed when she approached him, but the colour faded away as she recovered her breath), regular features, and a mobility of expression which bore record of every change of feeling. He saw all this in a few moments, and he wondered only the more at the stoicism of her manner during his interview with Mr. Talboys. There were no tears in her eyes, but they were bright with a feverish lustre—terribly bright and dry—and he could see that her lips trembled as she spoke to him.

"Miss Talboys," he said, "what can I?—why——"

She interrupted him suddenly, catching at his wrist with her disengaged hand—she was holding her shawl in the other.

"Oh, let me speak to you," she cried—"let me speak to you, or I shall go mad. I heard it all.

I believe what you believe; and I shall go mad unless I can do something—something towards avenging his death."

For a few moments Robert Audley was too much bewildered to answer her. Of all things possible upon earth he had least expected to behold her thus.

"Take my arm, Miss Talboys," he said. "Pray calm yourself. Let us walk a little way back towards the house, and talk quietly. I would not have spoken as I did before you, had I known——"

"Had you known that I loved my brother," she said quickly. "How should you know that I loved him? How should any one think that I loved him, when I have never had power to win him a welcome beneath that roof, or a kindly word from his father. How should I dare to betray my love for him in that house, when I knew that even a sister's affection would be turned to his disadvantage? You do not know my father, Mr. Audley. I do. I knew that to intercede for George would have been to ruin his cause. I knew that to leave

matters in my father's hands, and to trust to time, was my only chance of ever seeing that dear brother again. And I waited—waited patiently, always hoping for the best; for I knew that my father loved his only son. I see your contemptuous smile, Mr. Audley, and I dare say it is difficult for a stranger to believe that underneath his affected stoicism, my father conceals some degree of affection for his children—no very warm attachment perhaps, for he has always ruled his life by the strict law of duty. Stop," she said, suddenly, laying her hand upon his arm, and looking back through the straight avenue of pines; "I ran out of the house by the backway. Papa must not see me talking to you, Mr. Audley, and he must not see the fly standing at the gate. Will you go into the high road and tell the man to drive on a little way? I will come out of the plantation by a little gate further on, and meet you in the road."

"But you will catch cold, Miss Talboys," remonstrated Robert, looking at her anxiously, for he saw that she was trembling. "You are shivering now."

"Not with cold," she answered. "I am thinking of my brother George. If you have any pity for the only sister of your lost friend, do what I ask you, Mr. Audley. I must speak to you—I must speak to you—calmly, if I can."

She put her hand to her head as if trying to collect her thoughts, and then pointed to the gate. Robert bowed and left her. He told the man to drive slowly towards the station, and walked on by the side of the tarred fence surrounding Mr. Talboys' grounds. About a hundred yards beyond the principal entrance he came to a little wooden gate in the fence, and waited at it for Miss Talboys.

She joined him presently, with her shawl still over her head, and her eyes still bright and tearless.

"Will you walk with me inside the plantation?" she said. "We might be observed on the high road."

He bowed, passed through the gate, and shut it behind him.

When she took his offered arm he found

that she was still trembling—trembling very violently.

"Pray, pray calm yourself, Miss Talboys," he said: "I may have been deceived in the opinion which I have formed; I may——"

"No, no, no," she exclaimed, "you are not deceived. My brother has been murdered. Tell me the name of that woman—the woman whom you suspect of being concerned in his disappearance—in his murder."

"That I cannot do until——"

"Until when?"

"Until I know that she is guilty."

"You told my father that you would abandon all idea of discovering the truth—that you would rest satisfied to leave my brother's fate a horrible mystery never to be solved upon this earth; but you will not do so, Mr. Audley—you will not be false to the memory of your friend. You will see vengeance done upon those who have destroyed him. You will do this, will you not?"

A gloomy shadow spread itself like a dark veil over Robert Audley's handsome face.

He remembered what he had said the day before at Southampton—

"A hand that is stronger than my own is beckoning me onward upon the dark road."

A quarter of an hour before, he had believed that all was over, and that he was released from the dreadful duty of discovering the secret of George's death. Now this girl, this apparently passionless girl, had found a voice, and was urging him on towards his fate.

"If you knew what misery to me may be involved in discovering the truth, Miss Talboys," he said, "you would scarcely ask me to pursue this business any further."

"But I do ask you," she answered, with suppressed passion—"I do ask you. I ask you to avenge my brother's untimely death. Will you do so? Yes or no?"

"What if I answer no?"

"Then I will do it myself!" she exclaimed, looking at him, with her bright brown eyes. "I myself will follow up the clue to this mystery; I will find this woman—yes, though you refuse to

tell me in what part of England my brother disappeared. I will travel from one end of the world to the other to find the secret of his fate, if you refuse to find it for me. I am of age; my own mistress; rich, for I have money left me by one of my aunts; I shall be able to employ those who will help me in my search, and I will make it to their interest to serve me well. Choose between the two alternatives, Mr. Audley. Shall you or I find my brother's murderer?"

He looked in her face, and saw that her resolution was the fruit of no transient womanish enthusiasm, which would give way under the iron hand of difficulty. Her beautiful features, naturally statuesque in their noble outlines, seemed transformed into marble by the rigidity of her expression. The face in which he looked was the face of a woman whom death only could turn from her purpose.

"I have grown up in an atmosphere of suppression," she said, quietly; "I have stifled and dwarfed the natural feelings of my heart, until they have become unnatural in their intensity; I

have been allowed neither friends nor lovers. My mother died when I was very young. My father has always been to me what you saw him to-day. I have had no one but my brother. All the love that my heart can hold has been centred upon him. Do you wonder, then, that when I hear that his young life has been ended by the hand of treachery, that I wish to see vengeance done upon the traitor? Oh, my God," she cried, suddenly clasping her hands, and looking up at the cold winter sky, "lead me to the murderer of my brother, and let mine be the hand to avenge his untimely death!"

Robert Audley stood looking at her with awe-stricken admiration. Her beauty was elevated into sublimity by the intensity of her suppressed passion. She was different to all other women that he had ever seen. His cousin was pretty, his uncle's wife was lovely, but Clara Talboys was beautiful. Niobe's face, sublimated by sorrow, could scarcely have been more purely classical than hers. Even her dress, puritan in its grey simplicity, became her beauty better than a more

beautiful dress would have become a less beautiful woman.

"Miss Talboys," said Robert, after a pause, "your brother shall not be unavenged. He shall not be forgotten. I do not think that any professional aid which you could procure would lead you as surely to the secret of this mystery as I can lead you, if you are patient and trust me."

"I will trust you," she answered, "for I see that you will help me."

"I believe that it is my destiny to do so," he said, solemnly.

In the whole course of his conversation with Harcourt Talboys, Robert Audley had carefully avoided making any deductions from the circumstances which he had submitted to George's father. He had simply told the story of the missing man's life, from the hour of his arriving in London to that of his disappearance: but he saw that Clara Talboys had arrived at the same conclusion as himself, and that it was tacitly understood between them.

"Have you any letters of your brother's, Miss Talboys?" he asked.

"Two. One written soon after his marriage; the other written at Liverpool, the night before he sailed for Australia."

"Will you let me see them?"

"Yes, I will send them to you, if you will give me your address. You will write to me from time to time, will you not? to tell me whether you are approaching the truth. I shall be obliged to act secretly here, but I am going to leave home in two or three months, and I shall be perfectly free then to act as I please."

"You are not going to leave England?" Robert asked.

"Oh no! I am only going to pay a long-promised visit to some friends in Essex."

Robert started so violently, as Clara Talboys said this, that she looked suddenly at his face. The agitation visible there betrayed a part of his secret.

"My brother George disappeared in Essex," she said.

He could not contradict her.

"I am sorry you have discovered so much," he replied. "My position becomes every day more complicated, every day more painful. Good-by."

She gave him her hand mechanically when he held out his, but it was colder than marble, and it lay listlessly in his own, and fell like a log at her side when he released it.

"Pray lose no time in returning to the house," he said, earnestly. "I fear you will suffer from this morning's work."

"Suffer!" she exclaimed, scornfully. "You talk to me of suffering, when the only creature in this world who ever loved me has been taken from it in the bloom of youth. What can there be for me henceforth but suffering? What is the cold to me?" she said, flinging back her shawl and baring her beautiful head to the bitter wind. "I would walk from here to London barefoot through the snow, and never stop by the way, if I could bring him back to life. What would I not do to bring him back? What would I not do?"

The words broke from her in a wail of passionate sorrow; and clasping her hands before

her face, she wept for the first time that day. The violence of her sobs shook her slender frame, and she was obliged to lean against the trunk of a tree for support.

Robert looked at her with a tender compassion in his face; she was so like the friend whom he had loved and lost, that it was impossible for him to think of her as a stranger; impossible to remember that they had met that morning for the first time.

"Pray, pray be calm," he said; "hope even against hope. We may both be deceived, your brother may still live."

"Oh! if it were so," she murmured, passionately; "if it could be so."

"Let us try and hope that it may be so."

"No," she answered, looking at him through her tears, "let us hope for nothing but revenge. Good-by, Mr. Audley. Stop; your address."

He gave her a card, which she put into the pocket of her dress.

"I will send you George's letters," she said; "they may help you. Good-by."

She left him half bewildered by the passionate energy of her manner, and the noble beauty of her face. He watched her as she disappeared amongst the straight trunks of the fir-trees, and then walked slowly out of the plantation.

"Heaven help those who stand between me and the secret," he thought, "for they will be sacrificed to the memory of George Talboys."

CHAPTER VI.

GEORGE'S LETTERS.

ROBERT AUDLEY did not return to Southampton, but took a ticket for the first up-train that left Wareham, and reached Waterloo-bridge an hour or two after dark. The snow, which had been hard and crisp in Dorsetshire, was a black and greasy slush in the Waterloo-road, thawed by the lamps of the gin-palaces and the flaring gas in the butchers' shops.

Robert Audley shrugged his shoulders as he looked at the dingy streets through which the Hansom carried him, the cabman choosing—with that delicious instinct which seems innate in the drivers of hackney vehicles—all those dark and hideous thoroughfares utterly unknown to the ordinary pedestrian.

"What a pleasant thing life is," thought the barrister. "What an unspeakable boon—what

an overpowering blessing! Let any man make a calculation of his existence, subtracting the hours in which he has been *thoroughly* happy—really and entirely at his ease, without one *arrière pensée* to mar his enjoyment—without the most infinitesimal cloud to overshadow the brightness of his horizon. Let him do this, and surely he will laugh in utter bitterness of soul when he sets down the sum of his felicity, and discovers the pitiful smallness of the amount. He will have enjoyed himself for a week or ten days in thirty years, perhaps. In thirty years of dull December, and blustering March, and showery April, and dark November weather, there may have been seven or eight glorious August days through which the sun has blazed in cloudless radiance, and the summer breezes have breathed perpetual balm. How fondly we recollect these solitary days of pleasure, and hope for their recurrence, and try to plan the circumstances that made them bright; and arrange, and predestinate, and diplomatise with fate for a renewal of the remembered joy. As if any joy could ever be built up out of such

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and such constituent parts! As if happiness were not essentially accidental—a bright and wandering bird, utterly irregular in its migrations; with us one summer's day, and for ever gone from us on the next! Look at marriages, for instance," mused Robert, who was as meditative in the jolting vehicle for whose occupation he was to pay sixpence a mile, as if he had been riding a mustang on the wide loneliness of the prairies. "Look at marriages! Who is to say which shall be the one judicious selection out of the nine hundred and ninety-nine mistakes? Who shall decide from the first aspect of the slimy creature, which is to be the one eel out of the colossal bag of snakes? That girl on the kerbstone yonder, waiting to cross the street when my chariot shall have passed, may be the one woman out of every female creature in this vast universe who could make me a happy man. Yet I pass her by—bespatter her with the mud from my wheels, in my helpless ignorance, in my blind submission to the awful hand of fatality. If that girl, Clara Talboys, had been five minutes later, I should have left Dor-

setshire, thinking her cold, hard, and unwomanly, and should have gone to my grave with that mistake part and parcel of my mind. I took her for a stately and heartless automaton; I know her now to be a noble and beautiful woman. What an incalculable difference this may make in my life. When I left that house, I went out into the winter day with the determination of abandoning all further thought of the secret of George's death, I see her, and she forces me onward upon the loathsome path—the crooked byway of watchfulness and suspicion. How can I say to this sister of my dead friend, 'I believe that your brother has been murdered! I believe that I know by whom, but I will take no step to set my doubts at rest, or to confirm my fears?' I cannot say this. This woman knows half my secret; she will soon possess herself of the rest, and then — and then——"

The cab stopped in the midst of Robert Audley's meditation, and he had to pay the cabman, and submit to all the dreary mechanism of life, which is the same whether we are glad or sorry—whether

we are to be married or hung, elevated to the woolsack or disbarred by our brother benchers on some mysterious technical tangle of wrong-doing, which is a social enigma to those outside the Middle Temple.

We are apt to be angry with this cruel hardness in our life—this unflinching regularity in the smaller wheels and meaner mechanism of the human machine, which knows no stoppage or cessation, though the mainspring be for ever broken, and the hands pointing to purposeless figures upon a shattered dial.

Who has not felt, in the first madness of sorrow, an unreasoning rage against the mute propriety of chairs and tables, the stiff squareness of Turkey carpets, the unbending obstinacy of the outward apparatus of existence? We want to root up gigantic trees in a primeval forest, and to tear their huge branches asunder in our convulsive grasp; and the utmost that we can do for the relief of our passion is to knock over an easy chair, or smash a few shillings'-worth of Mr. Copeland's manufacture.

Madhouses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange they are not larger, when we think of how many helpless wretches must beat their brains against this hopeless persistency of the orderly outward world, as compared with the storm and tempest, the riot and confusion within: —when we remember how many minds must tremble upon the narrow boundary between reason and unreason, mad to-day and sane to-morrow, mad yesterday and sane to-day.

Robert had directed the cabman to drop him at the corner of Chancery-lane, and he ascended the brilliantly-lighted staircase leading to the dining saloon of *The London*, and seated himself at one of the snug tables with a confused sense of emptiness and weariness, rather than any agreeable sensation of healthy hunger. He had come to the luxurious eating-house to dine, because it was absolutely necessary to eat something somewhere, and a great deal easier to get a very good dinner from Mr. Sawyer, than a very bad one from Mrs. Maloney, whose mind ran in one narrow channel of chops and steaks, only

variable by small creeks and outlets in the way of "briled sole" or "biled mack'*rill*." The solicitous waiter tried in vain to rouse poor Robert to a proper sense of the solemnity of the dinner question. He muttered something to the effect that the man might bring him anything he liked, and the friendly waiter, who knew Robert as a frequent guest at the little tables, went back to his master with a doleful face to say that Mr. Audley from Fig-tree court was evidently out of spirits. Robert ate his dinner, and drank a pint of Moselle; but he had poor appreciation for the excellence of the viands or the delicate fragrance of the wine. The mental monologue still went on, and the young philosopher of the modern school was arguing the favourite modern question of the nothingness of everything, and the folly of taking too much trouble to walk upon a road that led nowhere, or to compass a work that meant nothing.

"I accept the dominion of that pale girl, with the statuesque features and the calm brown eyes," he thought. "I recognise the power of a mind superior to my own, and I yield to it, and bow

down to it. I've been acting for myself, and thinking for myself, for the last few months, and I'm tired of the unnatural business. I've been false to the leading principle of my life, and I've suffered for my folly. I found two grey hairs in my head the week before last, and an impertinent crow has planted a delicate impression of his foot under my right eye. Yes, I'm getting old upon the right side; and why—why should it be so?"

He pushed away his plate, and lifted his eyebrows, staring at the crumbs upon the glistening damask, as he pondered the question—

"What the devil am I doing in this *galère?*" he asked. "But I am in it, and I can't get out of it; so I'd better submit myself to the brown-eyed girl, and do what she tells me, patiently and faithfully. What a wonderful solution to life's enigma there is in petticoat government! Man might lie in the sunshine and eat lotuses, and fancy it 'always afternoon,' if his wife would let him! But she wont, bless her impulsive heart and active mind! She knows better than that. Whoever heard of a woman taking life as it ought

to be taken? Instead of supporting it as an unavoidable nuisance, only redeemable by its brevity, she goes through it as if it were a pageant or a procession. She dresses for it, and simpers, and grins, and gesticulates for it. She pushes her neighbours, and struggles for a good place in the dismal march; she elbows, and writhes, and tramples, and prances, to the one end of making the most of the misery. She gets up early and sits up late, and is loud, and restless, and noisy, and unpitying. She drags her husband on to the woolsack, or pushes him into Parliament. She drives him full butt at the dear, lazy machinery of government; and knocks and buffets him about the wheels, and cranks, and screws, and pulleys; until somebody, for quiet's sake, makes him something that she wanted him to be made. That's why incompetent men sometimes sit in high places, and interpose their poor muddled intellects between the things to be done and the people that can do them, making universal confusion in the helpless innocence of well-placed incapacity. The square men in the round holes are pushed into them by their wives. The Eastern

potentate who declared that women were at the bottom of all mischief, should have gone a little further and seen why it is so. It is because women are *never lazy*. They don't know what it is to be quiet. They are Semiramides, and Cleopatras, and Joan of Arcs, Queen Elizabeths, and Catharine the Seconds, and they riot in battle, and murder, and clamour, and desperation. If they can't agitate the universe and play at ball with hemispheres, they'll make mountains of warfare and vexation out of domestic molehills; and social storms in household teacups. Forbid them to hold forth upon the freedom of nations and the wrongs of mankind, and they'll quarrel with Mrs. Jones about the shape of a mantle or the character of a small maid-servant. To call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex. They want freedom of opinion, variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, doctors, preachers, teachers, soldiers, legislators—anything they like —but let them be quiet—if they can."

Mr. Audley pushed his hands through the thick luxuriance of his straight brown hair, and uplifted the dark mass in his despair.

"I hate women," he thought, savagely. "They're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors. Look at this business of poor George's! It's all woman's work from one end to the other. He marries a woman, and his father casts him off, penniless and professionless. He hears of the woman's death and he breaks his heart—his good, honest, manly heart, worth a million of the treacherous lumps of self-interest and mercenary calculation which beat in women's breasts. He goes to a woman's house and he is never seen alive again. And now I find myself driven into a corner by another woman, of whose existence I had never thought until this day. And—and then," mused Mr. Audley, rather irrelevantly, "there's Alicia, too; *she's* another nuisance. She'd like me to marry her I know; and she'll make me do it, I dare say, before she's done with me. But I'd much rather not; though she is

a dear, bouncing, generous thing, bless her poor little heart."

Robert paid his bill and rewarded the waiter liberally. The young barrister was very willing to distribute his comfortable little income amongst the people who served him, for he carried his indifference to all things in the universe, even to the matter of pounds, shillings, and pence. Perhaps he was rather exceptional in this, as you may frequently find that the philosopher who calls life an empty delusion is pretty sharp in the investment of his moneys; and recognises the tangible nature of India Bonds, Spanish Certificates, and Egyptian Scrip — as contrasted with the painful uncertainty of an Ego or a non-Ego in metaphysics.

The snug rooms in Fig-tree Court seemed dreary in their orderly quiet to Robert Audley upon this particular evening. He had no inclination for his French novels, though there was a packet of uncut romances, comic and sentimental, ordered a month before, waiting his pleasure upon one of the tables. He took his favourite meer-

schaum and dropped into his favourite chair with a sigh.

"It's comfortable, but it seems so d——d lonely to-night. If poor George were sitting opposite to me, or—or even George's sister—she's very like him—existence might be a little more endurable. But when a fellow has lived by himself for eight or ten years he begins to be bad company."

He burst out laughing presently, as he finished his first pipe.

"The idea of my thinking of George's sister," he thought; "what a preposterous idiot I am."

The next day's post brought him a letter in a firm but feminine hand, which was strange to him. He found the little packet lying on his breakfast-table, beside the warm French roll wrapped in a napkin by Mrs. Maloney's careful but rather dirty hands. He contemplated the envelope for some minutes before opening it—not in any wonder as to his correspondent, for the letter bore the postmark of Grange Heath, and he knew that there was only one person who was

likely to write to him from that obscure village; but in that lazy dreaminess which was a part of his character.

"From Clara Talboys," he murmured slowly, as he looked critically at the clearly-shaped letters of his name and address. "Yes, from Clara Talboys, most decidedly; I recognise a feminine resemblance to poor George's hand; neater than his, and more decided than his, but very like, very like."

He turned the letter over and examined the seal, which bore his friend's familiar crest.

I wonder what she says to me?" he thought. "It's a long letter, I dare say; she's the kind of woman who would write a long letter—a letter that will urge me on, drive me forward, wrench me out of myself, I've no doubt. But that can't be helped—so here goes!"

He tore open the envelope with a sigh of resignation. It contained nothing but George's two letters, and a few words written on the flap:—"I send the letters; please preserve and return them.—C. T."

The letter, written from Liverpool, told nothing of the writer's life, except his sudden determination of starting for a new world, to redeem the fortunes that had been ruined in the old. The letter, written almost immediately after George's marriage, contained a full description of his wife—such a description as a man could only write within three weeks of a love-match—a description in which every feature was minutely catalogued, every grace of form or beauty of expression fondly dwelt upon, every charm of manner lovingly depicted.

Robert Audley read the letter three times before he laid it down.

"If George could have known for what purpose this description would serve when he wrote it," thought the young barrister, "surely his hand would have fallen paralysed by horror, and powerless to shape one syllable of these tender words."

CHAPTER VII.

RETROGRADE INVESTIGATION.

THE dreary London January dragged its dull length slowly out. The last slender records of Christmas time were swept away, and Robert Audley still lingered in town—still spent his lonely evenings in his quiet sitting-room in Fig-tree Court—still wandered listlessly in the Temple Gardens on sunny mornings, absently listening to the children's babble, idly watching their play. He had many friends among the inhabitants of the quaint old buildings round him; he had other friends far away in pleasant country places, whose spare bedrooms were always at Bob's service, whose cheerful firesides had snugly luxurious chairs specially allotted to him. But he seemed to have lost all taste for companionship, all sympathy with the pleasures and occupations of his class, since the disappearance of George Talboys.

Elderly benchers indulged in facetious observations upon the young man's pale face and moody manner. They suggested the probability of some unhappy attachment, some feminine ill-usage as the secret cause of the change. They told him to be of good cheer, and invited him to supper-parties, at which "lovely woman, with all her faults, God bless her," was drunk by gentlemen who shed tears as they proposed the toast, and were maudlin and unhappy in their cups towards the close of the entertainment. Robert had no inclination for the wine-bibbing and the punch-making. The one idea of his life had become his master. He was the bonden slave of one gloomy thought—one horrible presentiment. A dark cloud was brooding over his uncle's house, and it was his hand which was to give the signal for the thunder-clap and the tempest that was to ruin that noble life.

"If she would only take warning and run away," he said to himself sometimes. "Heaven knows, I have given her a fair chance. Why doesn't she take it, and run away?"

He heard sometimes from Sir Michael, sometimes from Alicia. The young lady's letter rarely contained more than a few curt lines, informing him that her papa was well; and that Lady Audley was in very high spirits, amusing herself in her usual frivolous manner, and with her usual disregard for other people.

A letter from Mr. Marchmont, the Southampton schoolmaster, informed Robert that little Georgey was going on very well, but that he was behindhand in his education, and had not yet passed the intellectual Rubicon of words of two syllables. Captain Maldon had called to see his grandson, but that privilege had been withheld from him, in accordance with Mr. Audley's instructions. The old man had furthermore sent a parcel of pastry and sweetmeats to the little boy, which had also been rejected on the ground of indigestible and bilious tendencies in the edibles.

Towards the close of February, Robert received a letter from his cousin Alicia; which hurried him one step further forward towards his destiny, by causing him to return to the house from which he

had been in a manner exiled at the instigation of his uncle's wife.

"Papa is very ill," Alicia wrote; "not dangerously ill, thank God; but confined to his room by an attack of low fever which has succeeded a violent cold. Come and see him, Robert, if you have any regard for your nearest relations. He has spoken about you several times; and I know he will be glad to have you with him. Come at once, but say nothing about this letter.

"From your affectionate cousin,

"ALICIA."

A sick and deadly terror chilled Robert Audley's heart, as he read this letter—a vague yet hideous fear, which he dared not shape into any definite form.

"Have I done right?" he thought, in the first agony of this new horror—"have I done right to tamper with justice; and to keep the secret of my doubts, in the hope that I was shielding those I love from sorrow and disgrace? What shall I do if I find him ill; very ill; dying perhaps; dying upon *her* breast? What shall I do?"

One course was clear before him; and the first step of that course, a rapid journey to Audley Court. He packed his portmanteau; jumped into a cab; and reached the railway station within an hour of his receipt of Alicia's letter, which had come by the afternoon post.

The dim village lights flickered faintly through the growing dusk when Robert reached Audley. He left his portmanteau with the stationmaster, and walked at a leisurely pace through the quiet lanes that led away to the still loneliness of the Court. The over-arching trees stretched their leafless branches above his head, bare and weird in the dusky light. A low moaning wind swept across the flat meadow land, and tossed those rugged branches hither and thither against the dark grey sky. They looked like the ghostly arms of shrunken and withered giants beckoning Robert to his uncle's house. They looked like threatening phantoms in the chill winter twilight, gesticulating to him to hasten upon his journey. The long avenue, so bright and pleasant when the perfumed limes scattered their light bloom upon the

pathway, and the dog-rose leaves floated on the summer air, was terribly bleak and desolate in the cheerless interregnum that divides the homely joys of Christmas from the pale blush of coming spring—a dead pause in the year, in which Nature seems to lie in a tranced sleep, awaiting the wondrous signal for the budding of the tree, and the bursting of the flower.

A mournful presentiment crept into Robert Audley's heart as he drew nearer to his uncle's house. Every changing outline in the landscape was familiar to him; every bend of the trees; every caprice of the untrammelled branches; every undulation in the bare hawthorn hedge, broken by dwarf horse-chestnuts, stunted willows, blackberry and hazel bushes.

Sir Michael had been a second father to the young man, a generous and noble friend, a grave and earnest adviser; and perhaps the strongest sentiment of Robert's heart was his love for the grey-bearded baronet. But the grateful affection was so much a part of himself, that it seldom found an outlet in words; and a stranger would

never have fathomed the strength of feeling which lay, a deep and powerful current, beneath the stagnant surface of the barrister's character.

"What would become of this place if my uncle were to die?" he thought, as he drew nearer to the ivied archway, and the still water-pools, coldly grey in the twilight. "Would other people live in the old house, and sit under the low oak ceilings in the homely familiar rooms?"

That wonderful faculty of association, so interwoven with the inmost fibres of even the hardest nature, filled the young man's breast with a prophetic pain as he remembered that, however long or late, the day must come on which the oaken shutters would be closed for awhile, and the sunshine shut out of the house he loved. It was painful to him even to remember this; as it must always be painful to think of the narrow lease which the greatest upon this earth can ever hold of its grandeurs. Is it so wonderful that some wayfarers drop asleep under the hedges; scarcely caring to toil onward on a journey that leads to no abiding habitation? Is it wonderful

that there have been quietists in the world ever since Christ's religion was first preached upon earth? Is it strange that there is patient endurance and tranquil resignation, calm expectation of that which is to come on the further shore of the dark flowing river? Is it not rather to be wondered that anybody should ever care to be great for greatness' sake; for any other reason than pure conscientiousness; the simple fidelity of the servant who fears to lay his talent by in a napkin, knowing that indifference is near akin to dishonesty? If Robert Audley had lived in the time of Thomas A'Kempis, he would very likely have built himself a narrow hermitage amid some forest loneliness, and spent his life in tranquil imitation of the reputed author of *The Imitation*. As it was, Fig-tree Court was a pleasant hermitage in its way, and for breviaries and Books of Hours, I am ashamed to say the young barrister substituted Paul de Kock and Dumas, *fils*. But his sins were of so simply negative an order, that it would have been very easy for him to have abandoned them for negative virtues.

Only one solitary light was visible in the long irregular range of windows facing the archway, as Robert passed under the gloomy shade of the rustling ivy, restless in the chill moaning of the wind. He recognised that lighted window as the large oriel in his uncle's room. When last he had looked at the old house it had been gay with visitors, every window glittering like a low star in the dusk; now, dark and silent, it faced the winter's night like some dismal baronial habitation, deep in a woodland solitude.

The man who opened the door to the unlooked-for visitor, brightened as he recognised his master's nephew.

"Sir Michael will be cheered up a bit, sir, by the sight of you," he said, as he ushered Robert Audley into the fire-lit library, which seemed desolate by reason of the baronet's easy chair standing empty on the broad hearth-rug. "Shall I bring you some dinner here, sir, before you go upstairs?" the servant asked. "My lady and Miss Audley have dined early during my master's

illness, but I can bring you anything you would please to take, sir."

"I'll take nothing until I have seen my uncle," Robert answered, hurriedly; "that is to say, if I can see him at once. He is not too ill to receive me, I suppose?" he added, anxiously.

"Oh, no, sir—not too ill; only a little low, sir. This way, if you please."

He conducted Robert up the short flight of shallow oaken stairs to the octagon chamber in which George Talboys had sat so long five months before, staring absently at my lady's portrait. The picture was finished now, and hung in the post of honour opposite the window, amidst Claudes, Poussins, and Wouvermans, whose less brilliant hues were killed by the vivid colouring of the modern artist. The bright face looked out of that tangled glitter of golden hair, in which the Pre-Raphaelites delight, with a mocking smile, as Robert paused for a moment to glance at the well-remembered picture. Two or three moments afterwards he had passed through my lady's boudoir and dressing-room, and stood upon

the threshold of Sir Michael's room. The baronet lay in a quiet sleep, his arm lying outside the bed, and his strong hand clasped in his young wife's delicate fingers. Alicia sat in a low chair beside the broad open hearth, on which the huge logs burned fiercely in the frosty atmosphere. The interior of this luxurious bed-chamber might have made a striking picture for an artist's pencil. The massive furniture, dark and sombre, yet broken up and relieved here and there by scraps of gilding, and masses of glowing colour; the elegance of every detail, in which wealth was subservient to purity of taste; and last, but greatest in importance, the graceful figures of the two women and the noble form of the old man would have formed a worthy study for any painter.

Lucy Audley, with her disordered hair in a pale haze of yellow gold about her thoughtful face, the flowing lines of her soft muslin dressing-gown falling in straight folds to her feet, and clasped at the waist by a narrow circlet of agate links, might have served as a model for a mediæval saint, in

one of the tiny chapels hidden away in the nooks and corners of a grey old cathedral, unchanged by Reformation or Cromwell; and what saintly martyr of the Middle Ages could have borne a holier aspect than the man whose grey beard lay upon the dark silken coverlet of the stately bed?

Robert paused upon the threshold, fearful of awaking his uncle. The two ladies had heard his step, cautious though he had been, and lifted their heads to look at him. My lady's face quietly watching the sick man, had worn an anxious earnestness which made it only more beautiful; but the same face, recognising Robert Audley, faded from its delicate brightness, and looked scared and wan in the lamplight.

"Mr. Audley!" she cried, in a faint, tremulous voice.

"Hush!" whispered Alicia, with a warning gesture; "you will wake papa. How good of you to come, Robert," she added, in the same whispered tones, beckoning to her cousin to take an empty chair near the bed.

The young man seated himself in the indicated seat at the bottom of the bed, and opposite to my lady, who sat close beside the pillows. He looked long and earnestly at the face of the sleeper; still longer, still more earnestly at the face of Lady Audley, which was slowly recovering its natural hues.

"He has not been very ill, has he?" Robert asked in the same key as that in which Alicia had spoken.

My lady answered the question.

"Oh, no, not dangerously ill," she said, without taking her eyes from her husband's face; "but still we have been anxious, very, very anxious."

Robert never relaxed his scrutiny of that pale face.

"She shall look at me," he thought; "I will make her meet my eyes, and I will read her as I have read her before. She shall know how useless her artifices are with me."

He paused for a few minutes before he spoke again. The regular breathing of the sleeper, the ticking of a gold hunting-watch suspended at

the head of the bed, and the crackling of the burning logs, were the only sounds that broke the stillness.

"I have no doubt you have been anxious, Lady Audley," Robert said, after a pause, fixing my lady's eyes as they wandered furtively to his face. "There is no one to whom my uncle's life can be of more value than to you. Your happiness, your prosperity, your *safety* depend alike upon his existence."

The whisper in which he uttered these words was too low to reach the other side of the room where Alicia sat.

Lucy Audley's eyes met those of the speaker with some gleam of triumph in their light.

"I know that," she said. "Those who strike me must strike through him."

She pointed to the sleeper as she spoke, still looking at Robert Audley. She defied him with her blue eyes, their brightness intensified by the triumph in their glance. She defied him with her quiet smile—a smile of fatal beauty, full of lurking significance and mysterious meaning—the

smile which the artist had exaggerated in his portrait of Sir Michael's wife.

Robert turned away from the lovely face, and shaded his eyes with his hand; putting a barrier between my lady and himself; a screen which baffled her penetration and provoked her curiosity. Was he still watching her or was he thinking? and of what was he thinking?

Robert Audley had been seated at the bedside for upwards of an hour before his uncle woke. The baronet was delighted at his nephew's coming.

"It was very good of you to come to me, Bob," he said. "I have been thinking of you a good deal since I've been ill. You and Lucy must be good friends, you know, Bob; and you must learn to think of her as your aunt, sir; though she is young and beautiful; and—and—and—you understand, eh?"

Robert grasped his uncle's hand, but he looked down gravely as he answered—

"I do understand you, sir," he said quietly; "and I give you my word of honour that I am

steeled against my lady's fascinations. She knows that as well as I do."

Lucy Audley made a little grimace with her pretty lips.

"Bah, you silly Robert," she exclaimed; "you take everything *au serieux*. If I thought you were rather too young for a nephew, it was only in my fear of other people's foolish gossip; not from any——"

She hesitated for a moment, and escaped any conclusion to her sentence by the timely intervention of Mr. Dawson, her late employer, who entered the room upon his evening visit while she was speaking.

He felt the patient's pulse; asked two or three questions; pronounced the baronet to be steadily improving; exchanged a few common-place remarks with Alicia and Lady Audley; and prepared to leave the room. Robert rose and accompanied him to the door.

"I will light you to the staircase," he said, taking a candle from one of the tables, and lighting it at the lamp.

"No, no, Mr. Audley, pray do not trouble yourself," expostulated the surgeon; "I know my way very well indeed."

Robert insisted; and the two men left the room together. As they entered the octagon antechamber, the barrister paused and shut the door behind him.

"Will you see that the other door is closed, Mr. Dawson?" he said, pointing to that which opened upon the staircase. "I wish to have a few moments' private conversation with you."

"With much pleasure," replied the surgeon, complying with Robert's request; "but if you are at all alarmed about your uncle, Mr. Audley, I can set your mind at rest. There is no occasion for the least uneasiness. Had his illness been at all serious, I should have telegraphed immediately for the family physician."

"I am sure that you would have done your duty sir," answered Robert, gravely. "But I am not going to speak of my uncle. I wish to ask you two or three questions about another person."

"Indeed."

"The person who once lived in your family as Miss Lucy Graham; the person who is now Lady Audley."

Mr. Dawson looked up with an expression of surprise upon his quiet face.

"Pardon me, Mr. Audley," he answered; "you can scarcely expect me to answer any questions about your uncle's wife, without Sir Michael's express permission. I can understand no motive which can prompt you to ask such questions—no worthy motive, at least." He looked severely at the young man, as much as to say, "You have been falling in love with your uncle's pretty wife, sir, and you want to make me a go-between in some treacherous flirtation; but it wont do, sir; it wont do."

"I always respected the lady as Miss Graham, sir," he said, "and I esteem her doubly as Lady Audley—not on account of her altered position, but because she is the wife of one of the noblest men in Christendom."

"You cannot respect my uncle or my uncle's

honour more sincerely than I do," answered Robert. "I have no unworthy motive for the questions I am about to ask; and you *must* answer them."

"*Must!*" echoed Mr. Dawson, indignantly.

"Yes; you are my uncle's friend. It was at your house he met the woman who is now his wife. She called herself an orphan, I believe, and enlisted his pity as well as his admiration in her behalf. She told him that she stood alone in the world, did she not?—without friend or relatives. This was all I could ever learn of her antecedents."

"What reason have you to wish to know more?" asked the surgeon.

"A very terrible reason," answered Robert Audley. "For some months past I have struggled with doubts and suspicions which have embittered my life. They have grown stronger every day; and they will not be set at rest by the commonplace sophistries and the shallow arguments with which men try to deceive themselves, rather than believe that which of all things upon earth they

most fear to believe. I do not think that the woman who bears my uncle's name, is worthy to be his wife. I may wrong her. Heaven grant that it is so. But if I do, the fatal chain of circumstantial evidence never yet linked itself so closely about an innocent person. I wish to set my doubts at rest, or—or to confirm my fears. There is but one manner in which I can do this. I must trace the life of my uncle's wife backwards, minutely and carefully, from this night to a period of six years ago. This is the twenty-fourth of February, fifty-nine. I want to know every record of her life between to-night and the February of the year fifty-three."

"And your motive is a worthy one?"

"Yes, I wish to clear her from a very dreadful suspicion."

"Which exists only in your mind?"

"And in the mind of one other person."

"May I ask who that person is?"

"No, Mr. Dawson," answered Robert, decisively; "I cannot reveal anything more than what I have already told you. I am a very irresolute,

vacillating man in most things. In this matter I am compelled to be decided. I repeat once more that I *must* know the history of Lucy Graham's life. If you refuse to help me to the small extent in your power, I will find others who will help me. Painful as it would be to me, I will ask my uncle for the information which you would withhold, rather than be baffled in the first step of my investigation."

Mr. Dawson was silent for some minutes.

"I cannot express how much you have astonished and alarmed me, Mr. Audley," he said. "I can tell you so little about Lady Audley's antecedents, that it would be mere obstinacy to withhold the small amount of information I possess. I have always considered your uncle's wife one of the most amiable of women. I *cannot* bring myself to think her otherwise. It would be an uprooting of one of the strongest convictions of my life, were I compelled to think her otherwise. You wish to follow her life backwards from the present hour to the year fifty-three?"

"I do."

"She was married to your uncle last June twelvemonth, in the Midsummer of fifty-seven. She had lived in my house a little more than thirteen months. She became a member of my household upon the fourteenth of May, in the year fifty-six."

"And she came to you——?"

"From a school at Brompton; a school kept by a lady of the name of Vincent. It was Mrs. Vincent's strong recommendation that induced me to receive Miss Graham into my family without any more especial knowledge of her antecedents."

"Did you see this Mrs. Vincent?"

"I did not. I advertised for a governess, and Miss Graham answered my advertisement. In her letter she referred me to Mrs. Vincent, the proprietress of a school in which she was then residing as junior teacher. My time is always so fully occupied, that I was glad to escape the necessity of a day's loss in going from Audley to London to inquire about the young lady's qualifications. I looked for Mrs. Vincent's name in the *Directory*, found it, concluded that she was a

responsible person, and wrote to her. Her reply was perfectly satisfactory:—Miss Lucy Graham was assiduous and conscientious; as well as fully qualified for the situation I offered. I accepted this reference, and I had no cause to regret what may have been an indiscretion. And now, Mr. Audley, I have told you all that I have the power to tell."

"Will you be so kind as to give me the address of this Mrs. Vincent?" asked Robert, taking out his pocket-book.

"Certainly. She was then living at No. 9, Crescent Villas, Brompton."

"Ah, to be sure," muttered Mr. Audley, a recollection of last September flashing suddenly back upon him as the surgeon spoke. "Crescent Villas —yes, I have heard the address before, from Lady Audley herself. This Mrs. Vincent telegraphed to my uncle's wife early in last September. She was ill—dying, I believe—and sent for my lady; but had removed from her old house and was not to be foun

"Indeed! I never heard Lady Audley mention the circumstance."

"Perhaps not. It occurred while I was down here. Thank you, Mr. Dawson, for the information which you have so kindly and honestly given me. It takes me back two and a half years in the history of my lady's life; but I have still a blank of three years, to fill up, before I can exonerate her from my terrible suspicion. Good evening."

Robert shook hands with the surgeon and returned to his uncle's room. He had been away about a quarter of an hour. Sir Michael had fallen asleep once more, and my lady's loving hands had lowered the heavy curtains and shaded the lamp by the bedside. Alicia and her father's wife were taking tea in Lady Audley's boudoir, the room next to the ante-chamber in which Robert and Mr. Dawson had been seated.

Lucy Audley looked up from her occupation amongst the fragile china cups, and watched Robert rather anxiously, as he walked softly to his uncle's room, and back again to the boudoir. She looked very pretty and innocent, seated behind the graceful group of delicate opal china and glittering silver. Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than

when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance. The floating mists from the boiling liquid in which she infuses the soothing herbs, whose secrets are known to her alone, envelop her in a cloud of scented vapour, through which she seems a social fairy, weaving potent spells with Gunpowder and Bohea. At the tea-table she reigns omnipotent, unapproachable. What do men know of the mysterious beverage? Read how poor Hazlitt made his tea, and shudder at the dreadful barbarism. How clumsily the wretched creatures attempt to assist the witch president of the tea-tray; how hopelessly they hold the kettle, how continually they imperil the frail cups and saucers, or the taper hands of the priestess. To do away with the tea-table is to rob woman of her legitimate empire. To send a couple of hulking men about amongst your visitors, distributing a mixture made in the housekeeper's room, is to reduce the most social and friendly of ceremonies to a formal giving out of rations. Better the pretty influence

of the teacups and saucers gracefully wielded in a woman's hand, than all the inappropriate power snatched at the point of the pen from the unwilling sterner sex. Imagine all the women of England elevated to the high level of masculine intellectuality; superior to crinoline; above pearl powder and Mrs. Rachael Levison; above taking the pains to be pretty; above making themselves agreeable; above tea-tables, and that cruelly scandalous and rather satirical gossip which even strong men delight in; and what a dreary, utilitarian, ugly life the sterner sex must lead.

My lady was by no means strong-minded. The starry diamond upon her white fingers flashed hither and thither amongst the tea-things, and she bent her pretty head over the marvellous Indian tea-caddy of sandal-wood and silver, with as much earnestness as if life held no higher purpose than the infusion of Bohea.

"You'll take a cup of tea with us, Mr. Audley?" she asked, pausing with the teapot in her hand to look up at Robert, who was standing near the door.

"If you please."

"But you have not dined, perhaps? Shall I ring and tell them to bring you something a little more substantial than biscuits and transparent bread-and-butter?"

"No, thank you, Lady Audley. I took some lunch before I left town. I'll trouble you for nothing but a cup of tea."

He seated himself at the little table and looked across it at his cousin Alicia, who sat with a book in her lap, and had the air of being very much absorbed by its pages. The bright brunette complexion had lost its glowing crimson, and the animation of the young lady's manner was suppressed —on account of her father's illness, no doubt, Robert thought.

"Alicia, my dear," the barrister said, after a very leisurely contemplation of his cousin, "you're not looking well."

Miss Audley shrugged her shoulders, but did not condescend to lift her eyes from her book.

"Perhaps not," she answered, contemptuously. "What does it matter? I'm growing a philo-

sopher of your school, Robert Audley. What does it matter? Who cares whether I am well or ill?"

"What a spit-fire she is," thought the barrister. He always knew his cousin was angry with him when she addressed him as "Robert Audley."

"You needn't pitch into a fellow because he asks you a civil question, Alicia," he said, reproachfully. "As to nobody caring about your health, that's nonsense. *I*-care." Miss Audley looked up with a bright smile. "Sir Harry Towers cares." Miss Audley returned to her book with a frown.

"What are you reading there, Alicia?" Robert asked, after a pause, during which he had sat thoughtfully stirring his tea.

"*Changes and Chances.*"

"A novel?"

"Yes."

"Who is it by?"

"The author of *Follies and Faults*," answered Alice, still pursuing her study of the romance upon her lap.

"Is it interesting?"

Miss Audley pursed up her mouth, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Not particularly," she said.

"Then I think you might have better manners than to read it while your first cousin is sitting opposite you," observed Mr. Audley, with some gravity, "especially as he has only come to pay you a flying visit, and will be off to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow morning!" exclaimed my lady, looking up suddenly.

Though the look of joy upon Lady Audley's face was as brief as a flash of lightning on a summer sky, it was not unperceived by Robert.

"Yes," he said, "I shall be obliged to run up to London to-morrow on business, but I shall return the next day, if you will allow me, Lady Audley, and stay here till my uncle recovers."

"But you are not seriously alarmed about him, are you?" asked my lady, anxiously. "You do not think him very ill?"

"No," answered Robert. "Thank Heaven, I

think there is not the slightest cause for apprehension."

My lady sat silent for a few moments, looking at the empty teacups with a prettily thoughful face—a face grave with the innocent seriousness of a musing child.

"But you were closeted such a long time with Mr. Dawson just now," she said, after this brief pause.—"I was quite alarmed at the length of your conversation. Were you talking of Sir Michael all the time?"

"No; not all the time."

My lady looked down at the teacups once more.

"Why, what could you find to say to Mr. Dawson, or he to say to you?" she asked, after another pause. "You are almost strangers to each other."

"Suppose Mr. Dawson wished to consult me about some law business."

"Was it that?" cried Lady Audley, eagerly.

"It would be rather unprofessional to tell you if it were so, my lady," answered Robert, gravely.

My lady bit her lip, and relapsed into silence.

Alicia threw down her book, and watched her cousin's pre-occupied face. He talked to her now and then for a few minutes, but it was evidently an effort to him to arouse himself from his reverie.

"Upon my word, Robert Audley, you are a very agreeable companion," exclaimed Alicia at length, her rather limited stock of patience quite exhausted by two or three of these abortive attempts at conversation. "Perhaps the next time you come to the Court, you will be good enough to bring your *mind* with you. By your present inanimate appearance, I should imagine that you had left your intellect, such as it is, somewhere in the Temple. You were never one of the liveliest of people, but latterly you have really grown almost unendurable. I suppose you are in love, Mr. Audley, and are thinking of the honoured object of your affections."

He was thinking of Clara Talboys' uplifted face, sublime in its unutterable grief; of her impassioned words, still ringing in his ears as clearly as when they were first spoken. Again he saw

her looking at him with her bright brown eyes. Again he heard that solemn question, "Shall you or I find my brother's murderer?" And he was in Essex; in the little village from which he firmly believed George Talboys had never departed. He was on the spot at which all record of his friend's life ended as suddenly as a story ends when the reader shuts the book. And could he withdraw now from the investigation in which he found himself involved? Could he stop now? For any consideration? No; a thousand times no! Not with the image of that grief-stricken face imprinted on his mind. Not with the accents of that earnest appeal ringing on his ear.

CHAPTER VIII.

SO FAR AND NO FARTHER.

Robert left Audley the next morning by an early train, and reached Shoreditch a little after nine o'clock. He did not return to his chambers, but called a cab and drove straight to Crescent Villas, West Brompton. He knew that he should fail in finding the lady he went to seek at this address, as his uncle had failed a few months before, but he thought it possible to obtain some clue to the schoolmistress's new residence, in spite of Sir Michael's ill-success.

"Mrs. Vincent was in a dying state, according to the telegraphic message," Robert thought. "If I do find her, I shall at least succeed in discovering whether that message was genuine."

He found Crescent Villas after some difficulty. The houses were large, but they lay half embedded amongst the chaos of brick and mortar

rising around them. New terraces, new streets, new squares led away into hopeless masses of stone and plaster on every side. The roads were sticky with damp clay, which clogged the wheels of the cab and buried the fetlocks of the horse. The desolation of desolations—that awful aspect of incompleteness and discomfort which pervades a new and unfinished neighbourhood—had set its dismal seal upon the surrounding streets which had arisen about and entrenched Crescent Villas; and Robert wasted forty minutes by his own watch, and an hour and a quarter according to the cabman's reckoning, in driving up and down uninhabited streets and terraces, trying to find the Villas; whose chimney-pots were frowning down upon him, black and venerable, amid groves of virgin plaster, undimmed by time or smoke.

But having at last succeeded in reaching his destination, Mr. Audley alighted from the cab, directed the driver to wait for him at a certain corner, and set out upon his voyage of discovery.

"If I were a distinguished Q. C., I could not

do this sort of thing," he thought; "my time would be worth a guinea or so a minute, and I should be retained in the great case of Hoggs *v.* Boggs, going forward this very day before a special jury at Westminster Hall. As it is, I can afford to be patient."

He inquired for Mrs. Vincent at the number which Mr. Dawson had given him. The maid who opened the door had never heard that lady's name: but after going to inquire of her mistress, she returned to tell Robert that Mrs. Vincent had lived there, but that she had left two months before the present occupants had entered the house, "and missus has been here fifteen months," the girl added, explanatorily.

"But you cannot tell me where she went on leaving here?" Robert asked, despondingly.

"No, sir; missus says she believes the lady failed, and that she left sudden like, and didn't want her address to be known in the neighbourhood."

Mr. Audley felt himself at a standstill once

more. If Mrs. Vincent had left the place in debt, she had no doubt scrupulously concealed her whereabouts. There was little hope, then, of learning her address from any of the tradespeople; and yet, on the other hand, it was just possible that some of her sharpest creditors might have made it their business to discover the defaulter's retreat.

He looked about him for the nearest shops, and found a baker's, a stationer's, and a fruiterer's, a few paces from the crescent. Three empty-looking, pretentious shops, with plate-glass windows, and a hopeless air of gentility.

He stopped at the baker's, who called himself a pastrycook and confectioner, and exhibited some specimens of petrified sponge-cake in glass bottles, and some highly-glazed tarts, covered with green gauze.

"She *must* have bought bread," Robert thought, as he deliberated before the baker's shop; "and she is likely to have bought it at the handiest place. I'll try the baker."

The baker was standing behind his counter,

disputing the items of a bill with a shabby-genteel young woman. He did not trouble himself to attend to Robert Audley till he had settled the dispute, but he looked up as he was receipting the bill, and asked the barrister what he pleased to want.

"Can you tell me the address of a Mrs. Vincent, who lived at No. 9, Crescent Villas, a year and a half ago?" Mr. Audley inquired, mildly.

"No, I can't," answered the baker, growing very red in the face, and speaking in an unnecessarily loud voice; "and what's more, I wish I could. That lady owes me upwards of eleven pound for bread, and it's rather more than I can afford to lose. If anybody can tell me where she lives, I shall be much obliged to 'em for so doing."

Robert Audley shrugged his shoulders, and wished the man good morning. He felt that his discovery of the lady's whereabouts would involve more trouble than he had expected. He might have looked for Mrs. Vincent's name

in the *Post Office Directory*, but he thought it scarcely likely that a lady who was on such uncomfortable terms with her creditors would afford them so easy a means of ascertaining her residence.

"If the baker can't find her, how should *I* find her?" he thought, despairingly. "If a resolute, sanguine, active, and energetic creature, such as the baker, fail to achieve this business, how can a lymphatic wretch like me hope to accomplish it? Where the baker has been defeated, what preposterous folly it would be for me to try to succeed."

Mr. Audley abandoned himself to these gloomy reflections as he walked slowly back towards the corner at which he had left the cab. About half-way between the baker's shop and this corner, he was arrested by hearing a woman's step close at his side, and a woman's voice asking him to stop. He turned and found himself face to face with the shabbily-dressed woman whom he had left settling her account with the baker.

"Eh, what?" he asked, vaguely. "Can I do anything for you, ma'am? Does Mrs. Vincent owe *you* money, too?"

"Yes, sir," the woman answered, with a semi-genteel manner which corresponded with the shabby gentility of her dress; "Mrs. Vincent is in my debt; but it isn't that, sir. I—I want to know, please, what your business may be with her—because—because——"

"You can give me her address if you choose, ma'am? That's what you mean to say, isn't it?"

The woman hesitated a little, looking rather suspiciously at Robert.

"You're not connected with—with the tally business, are you, sir?" she asked, after considering Mr. Audley's personal appearance for a few moments.

"The *what,* ma'am?" cried the young barrister, staring aghast at his questioner.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," exclaimed the little woman, seeing that she had made some very awful mistake. "I thought you might have

been, you know. Some of the gentlemen who collect for the tally-shops do dress so very handsome; and I know Mrs. Vincent owes a good deal of money."

Robert Audley laid his hand upon the speaker's arm.

"My dear madam," he said, "I want to know nothing of Mrs. Vincent's affairs. So far from being concerned in what you call *the tally business,* I have not the remotest idea of what you mean by that expression. You may mean a political conspiracy; you may mean some new species of taxes. Mrs. Vincent does not owe *me* any money, however badly she may stand with that awful-looking baker. I never saw her in my life; but I wish to see her to-day for the simple purpose of asking her a few very plain questions about a young lady who once resided in her house. If you know where Mrs. Vincent lives, and will give me her address, you will be doing me a great favour."

He took out his card-case and handed a card to the woman, who examined the slip

of pasteboard anxiously before she spoke again.

"I'm sure you look and speak like a gentleman, sir," she said, after a brief pause, "and I hope you will excuse me if I've seemed mistrustful like; but poor Mrs. Vincent has had dreadful difficulties, and I'm the only person hereabouts that she's trusted with her addresses. I'm a dressmaker, sir, and I've worked for her for upwards of six years, and though she doesn't pay me regular, you know, sir, she gives me a little money on account now and then, and I get on as well as I can. I may tell you where she lives, then, sir? You haven't deceived me, have you?"

"On my honour, no."

"Well, then, sir," said the dressmaker, dropping her voice as if she thought the pavement beneath her feet, or the iron railings before the houses by her side, might have ears to hear her, "it's Acacia Cottage, Peckham Grove. I took a dress there yesterday for Mrs. Vincent."

"Thank you," said Robert, writing the address in his pocket-book. "I am very much obliged

to you, and you may rely upon it, Mrs. Vincent shall not suffer any inconvenience through me."

He lifted his hat, bowed to the little dressmaker, and turned back to the cab.

"I have beaten the baker at any rate," he thought. "Now for the second stage, travelling backwards, in my lady's life."

The drive from Brompton to the Peckham-road was a very long one, and between Crescent Villas and Acacia Cottage Robert Audley had ample leisure for reflection. He thought of his uncle, lying weak and ill in the oak-room at Audley Court. He thought of the beautiful blue eyes watching Sir Michael's slumbers; the soft white hands tending on his waking wants; the low, musical voice soothing his loneliness; cheering and consoling his declining years. What a pleasant picture it might have been, had he been able to look upon it ignorantly, seeing no more than others saw, looking no farther than a stranger could look. But with the black cloud which he saw, or fancied he saw, brooding over it, what

an arch mockery, what a diabolical delusion it seemed.

Peckham Grove—pleasant enough in the summer-time—has rather a dismal aspect upon a dull February day, when the trees are bare and leafless, and the little gardens desolate. Acacia Cottage bore small token of the fitness of its nomenclature, and faced the road with its stuccoed walls, sheltered only by a couple of tal attenuated poplars. But it announced that it was Acacia Cottage by means of a small brass-plate upon one of the gate-posts, which was sufficient indication for the sharp-sighted cabman, who dropped Mr. Audley upon the pavement before the little gate.

Acacia Cottage was much lower in the social scale than Crescent Villas, and the small maid-servant who came to the low wooden gate and parleyed with Mr. Audley, was evidently well used to the encounter of relentless creditors across the same feeble barricade.

She murmured the familiar domestic fiction of uncertainty regarding her mistress's whereabouts;

and told Robert that if he would please to state his name and business, she would go and see if Mrs. Vincent was at home.

Mr. Audley produced a card, and wrote in pencil under his own name—"A connection of the late Miss Graham."

He directed the small servant to carry this card to her mistress, and quietly awaited the result.

The servant returned in about five minutes with the key of the gate. Her mistress was at home, she told Robert as she admitted him, and would be happy to see the gentleman.

The square parlour into which Robert was ushered bore in every scrap of ornament, in every article of furniture, the unmistakeable stamp of that species of poverty which is most comfortless, because it is never stationary. The mechanic who furnishes his tiny sitting-room with half-a-dozen cane chairs, a Pembroke table, a Dutch clock, a tiny looking-glass, a crockery shepherd and shepherdess, and a set of gaudily-japanned iron tea trays, makes the most of his limited

possessions, and generally contrives to get some degree of comfort out of them; but the lady who loses the handsome furniture of the house she is compelled to abandon and encamps in some smaller habitation with the shabby remainder—bought in by some merciful friend at the sale of her effects—carries with her an aspect of genteel desolation and tawdry misery not easily to be paralleled in wretchedness by any other phase which poverty can assume.

The room which Robert Audley surveyed was furnished with the shabbier scraps snatched from the ruin which had overtaken the imprudent schoolmistress in Crescent Villas. A cottage piano, a cheffonier, six sizes too large for the room, and dismally gorgeous in gilded mouldings that were chipped and broken; a slim-legged card-table, placed in the post of honour, formed the principal pieces of furniture. A threadbare patch of Brussels carpet covered the centre of the room, and formed an oasis of roses and lilies upon a desert of faded green drugget. Knitted curtains shaded the windows, in which

hung wire baskets of horrible-looking plants of the cactus species, that grew downwards like some demented class of vegetation, whose prickly and spider-like members had a fancy for standing on their heads.

The green-baize covered card-table was adorned with gaudily-bound annuals or books of beauty, placed at right angles; but Robert Audley did not avail himself of these literary distractions. He seated himself upon one of the rickety chairs, and waited patiently for the advent of the schoolmistress. He could hear the hum of half-a-dozen voices in a room near him, and the jingling harmonies of a set of variations to *Deh Come,* upon a piano, whose every wire was evidently in the last stage of attenuation.

He had waited for about a quarter of an hour, when the door was opened, and a lady, very much dressed, and with the setting sunlight of faded beauty upon her face, entered the room.

"Mr. Audley, I presume," she said, motioning to Robert to reseat himself, and placing herself in an easy-chair opposite to him. "You will pardon

me, I hope, for detaining you so long; my duties——"

"It is I who should apologise for intruding upon you," Robert answered, politely; "but my motive for calling upon you is a very serious one, and must plead my excuse. You remember the lady whose name I wrote upon my card?"

"Perfectly."

"May I ask how much you know of that lady's history since her departure from your house?"

"Very little. In point of fact, scarcely anything at all. Miss Graham, I believe, obtained a situation in the family of a surgeon resident in Essex. Indeed, it was I who recommended her to that gentleman. I have never heard from her since she left me."

"But you have communicated with her?" Robert asked, eagerly.

"No, indeed."

Mr. Audley was silent for a few moments, the shadow of gloomy thoughts gathering darkly on his face.

"May I ask if you sent a telegraphic despatch

to Miss Graham early in last September, stating that you were dangerously ill, and that you wished to see her?"

Mrs. Vincent smiled at her visitor's question.

"I had no occasion to send such a message," she said, "I have never been seriously ill in my life."

Robert Audley paused before he asked any further questions, and scrawled a few pencilled words in his note-book.

"If I ask you a few straightforward questions about Miss Lucy Graham, madam," he said, "will you do me the favour to answer them without asking my motive for making such inquiries?"

"Most certainly," replied Mrs. Vincent. "I know nothing to Miss Graham's disadvantage, and have no justification for making a mystery of the little I do know."

"Then will you tell me at what date the young lady first came to you?"

Mrs. Vincent smiled and shook her head. She had a pretty smile—the frank smile of a woman who has been admired, and who has too long felt

the certainty of being able to please, to be utterly subjugated by any worldly misfortune.

"It's not the least use to ask me, Mr. Audley," she said. "I'm the most careless creature in the world; I never did, and never could remember dates, though I do all in my power to impress upon my girls how important it is for their future welfare that they should know when William the Conqueror began to reign, and all that kind of thing. But I haven't the remotest idea when Miss Graham came to me, although I know it was ages ago, for it was the very summer I had my peach-coloured silk. But we must consult Tonks—Tonks is sure to be right."

Robert Audley wondered who or what Tonks could be; a diary, perhaps, or a memorandum-book—some obscure rival of Letsome.

Mrs. Vincent rang the bell, which was answered by the maid-servant who had admitted Robert.

"Ask Miss Tonks to come to me," she said, "I want to see her particularly."

In less than five minutes Miss Tonks made her

appearance. She was wintry and rather frost-bitten in aspect, and seemed to bring cold air in the scanty folds of her sombre merino dress. She was no age in particular, and looked as if she had never been younger, and would never grow older, but would remain for ever working backwards and forwards in her narrow groove, like some self-feeding machine for the instruction of young ladies.

"Tonks, my dear," said Mrs. Vincent, without ceremony, "this gentleman is a relative of Miss Graham's. Do you remember how long it is since she came to us at Crescent Villas?"

"She came in August, 1854," answered Miss Tonks; "I think it was the eighteenth of August, but I'm not quite sure that it wasn't the seventeenth. I know it was on a Tuesday."

"Thank you, Tonks; you are a most invaluable darling," exclaimed Mrs. Vincent, with her sweetest smile. It was, perhaps, because of the invaluable nature of Miss Tonks's services that she had received no remuneration whatever from her employer for the last three or four years.

Mrs. Vincent might have hesitated to pay her from very contempt for the pitiful nature of the stipend as compared with the merits of the teacher.

"Is there anything else that Tonks or I can tell you, Mr. Audley?" asked the schoolmistress. "Tonks has a far better memory than I have."

"Can you tell me where Miss Graham came from when she entered your household?" Robert inquired.

"Not very precisely," answered Mrs. Vincent. "I have a vague notion that Miss Graham said something about coming from the sea-side, but she didn't say where, or if she did I have forgotten it. Tonks, did Miss Graham tell you where she came from?"

"Oh, no!" replied Miss Tonks, shaking her grim little head significantly. "Miss Graham told me nothing; she was too clever for that. She knew how to keep her own secrets, in spite of her innocent ways and her curly hair," Miss Tonks added, spitefully.

"You think she had secrets, then?" Robert asked, rather eagerly.

"I know she had," replied Miss Tonks with frosty decision; "all manner of secrets. *I* wouldn't have engaged such a person as junior teacher in a respectable school, without so much as one word of recommendation from any living creature."

"You had no reference, then, from Miss Graham?" asked Robert, addressing Mrs. Vincent.

"No," the lady answered, with some little embarrassment; "I waived that. Miss Graham waived the question of salary; I could not do less than waive the question of reference. She had quarrelled with her papa, she told me, and, she wanted to find a home away from all the people she had ever known. She wished to keep herself quite separate from these people. She had endured so much, she said, young as she was, and she wanted to escape from her troubles. How could I press her for a reference under these circumstances? especially when I saw that she

was a perfect lady? You know that Lucy Graham was a perfect lady, Tonks, and it is very unkind of you to say such cruel things about my taking her without a reference."

"When people make favourites, they are apt to be deceived by them," Miss Tonks answered, with icy sententiousness, and with no very perceptible relevance to the point in discussion.

"I never made her a favourite, you jealous Tonks," Mrs. Vincent answered, reproachfully. "I never said she was as useful as you, dear. You know I never did."

"Oh, no!" replied Miss Tonks, with a chilling accent, "you never said she was *useful*. She was only ornamental; a person to be shown off to visitors, and to play fantasias on the drawing-room piano."

"Then you can give me no clue to Miss Graham's previous history?" Robert asked, looking from the schoolmistress to her teacher. He saw very clearly that Miss Tonks bore an envious grudge against Lucy Graham—a grudge which even the lapse of time had not healed.

"If this woman knows anything to my lady's detriment, she will tell it," he thought. "She will tell it only too willingly."

But Miss Tonks appeared to know nothing whatever; except that Miss Graham had sometimes declared herself an ill-used creature, deceived by the baseness of mankind, and the victim of unmerited sufferings, in the way of poverty and deprivation. Beyond this, Miss Tonks could tell nothing; and although she made the most of what she did know, Robert very soon sounded the depth of her small stock of information.

"I have only one more question to ask," he said at last. "It is this. Did Miss Graham leave any books or knick-knacks, or any kind of property whatever, behind her, when she left your establishment?"

"Not to my knowledge," Mrs. Vincent replied.

"Yes," cried Miss Tonks, sharply. "She did leave something. She left a box, It's up-stairs in my room. I've got an old bonnet in it,

Would you like to see the box?" she asked, addressing Robert.

"If you will be so good as to allow me," he answered, "I should very much like to see it."

"I'll fetch it down," said Miss Tonks. "It's not very big."

She ran out of the room before Mr. Audley had time to utter any polite remonstrance.

"How pitiless these women are to each other," he thought, while the teacher was absent. "This one knows intuitively that there is some danger to the other lurking beneath my questions. She sniffs the coming trouble to her fellow female creature, and rejoices in it, and would take any pains to help me. What a world it is, and how these women take life out of our hands. Helen Maldon, Lady Audley, Clara Talboys, and now Miss Tonks—all womankind from beginning to end."

Miss Tonks re-entered while the young barrister was meditating upon the infamy of her sex. She carried a dilapidated paper-covered

bonnet-box, which she submitted to Robert's inspection.

Mr. Audley knelt down to examine the scraps of railway labels and addresses which were pasted here and there upon the box. It had been battered upon a great many different lines of railway, and had evidently travelled considerably. Many of the labels had been torn off, but fragments of some of them remained, and upon one yellow scrap of paper Robert read the letters TURI.

"The box has been to Italy," he thought. "Those are the first four letters of the word Turin, and the label is a foreign one."

The only direction which had not been either defaced or torn away was the last, which bore the name of Miss Graham, passenger to London. Looking very closely at this label, Mr. Audley discovered that it had been pasted over another.

"Will you be so good as to let me have a little water and a piece of sponge?" he said. "I want to get off this upper label. Believe me that I am justified in what I am doing."

Miss Tonks ran out of the room, and returned immediately with a basin of water and a sponge.

"Shall I take off the label?" she asked.

"No, thank you," Robert answered, coldly. "I can do it very well myself."

He damped the upper label several times before he could loosen the edges of the paper; but after two or three careful attempts, the moistened surface peeled off without injury to the underneath address.

Miss Tonks could not contrive to read this address across Robert's shoulder, though she exhibited considerable dexterity in her endeavours to accomplish that object.

Mr. Audley repeated his operations upon the lower label, which he removed from the box, and placed very carefully between two blank leaves of his pocket-book.

"I need intrude upon you no longer, ladies," he said, when he had done this. "I am extremely obliged to you for having afforded me all the information in your power. I wish you good morning."

Mrs. Vincent smiled and bowed, murmuring some complacent conventionality about the delight she had felt in Mr. Audley's visit. Miss Tonks, more observant, stared at the white change which had come over the young man's face since he had removed the upper label from the box.

Robert walked slowly away from Acacia Cottage. "If that which I have found to-day is no evidence for a jury," he thought, "it is surely enough to convince my uncle that he has married a designing and infamous woman."

CHAPTER IX.

BEGINNING AT THE OTHER END.

ROBERT AUDLEY walked slowly through the leafless grove, under the bare and shadowless trees in the grey February atmosphere, thinking as he went of the discovery he had just made.

"I have that in my pocket-book," he pondered, "which forms the connecting link between the woman whose death George Talboys read of in the *Times* newspaper and the woman who rules in my uncle's house. The history of Lucy Graham ends abruptly on the threshold of Mrs. Vincent's school. She entered that establishment in August, 1854. The schoolmistress and her assistant can tell me this, but they cannot tell me whence she came. They cannot give me one clue to the secrets of her life from the day of her birth until the day she entered that house. I can go no further in this backward investigation of my

lady's antecedents. What am I to do, then, if I mean to keep my promise to Clara Talboys?"

He walked on for a few paces revolving this question in his mind, with a darker shadow than the shadows of the gathering winter twilight on his face, and a heavy oppression of mingled sorrow and dread weighing down his heart.

"My duty is clear enough," he thought—"not the less clear because it is painful—not the less clear because it leads me step by step, carrying ruin and desolation with me, to the home I love. I must begin at the other end—I must begin at the other end, and discover the history of Helen Talboys from the hour of George's departure until the day of the funeral in the churchyard at Ventnor."

Mr. Audley hailed a passing Hansom, and drove back to his chambers.

He reached Fig-tree Court in time to write a few lines to Miss Talboys, and to post his letter at St. Martin's-le-Grand before six o'clock.

"It will save me a day," he thought, as he

drove to the General Post Office with this brief epistle.

He had written to Clara Talboys to inquire the name of the little seaport town in which George had met Captain Maldon and his daughter; for in spite of the intimacy between the two young men, Robert Audley knew very few particulars of his friend's brief married life.

From the hour in which George Talboys had read the announcement of his wife's death in the columns of the *Times*, he had avoided all mention of the tender history which had been so cruelly broken, the familiar record which had been so darkly blotted out.

There was so much that was painful in that brief story! There was such bitter self-reproach involved in the recollection of that desertion which must have seemed so cruel to her who waited and watched at home! Robert Audley comprehended this, and he did not wonder at his friend's silence. The sorrowful story had been tacitly avoided by both, and Robert was as ignorant of the unhappy history of this one year in

his schoolfellow's life as if they had never lived together in friendly companionship in those snug Temple chambers.

The letter, written to Miss Talboys by her brother George within a month of his marriage, was dated Harrowgate. It was at Harrowgate, therefore, Robert concluded, the young couple spent their honeymoon.

Robert Audley had requested Clara Talboys to telegraph an answer to his question, in order to avoid the loss of a day in the accomplishment of the investigation he had promised to perform.

The telegraphic answer reached Fig-tree Court before twelve o'clock the next day.

The name of the seaport town was Wildernsea, Yorkshire.

Within an hour of the receipt of this message Mr. Audley arrived at the King's-cross station, and took his ticket for Wildernsea by an express train that started at a quarter before two.

The shrieking engine bore him on the dreary northward journey, whirling him over desert wastes of flat meadow-land and bare corn-fields,

faintly tinted with fresh sprouting green. This northern road was strange and unfamiliar to the young barrister, and the wide expanse of the wintry landscape chilled him by its aspect of bare loneliness. The knowledge of the purpose of his journey blighted every object upon which his absent glances fixed themselves for a moment; only to wander wearily away; only to turn inwards upon that far darker picture always presenting itself to his anxious mind.

It was dark when the train reached the Hull terminus; but Mr. Audley's journey was not ended. Amidst a crowd of porters and scattered heaps of that incongruous and heterogeneous luggage with which travellers encumber themselves, he was led, bewildered and half asleep, to another train, which was to convey him along the branch line that swept past Wildernsea, and skirted the border of the German Ocean.

Half an hour after leaving Hull, Robert felt the briny freshness of the sea upon the breeze that blew in at the open window of the carriage, and an hour afterwards the train stopped at a

melancholy station, built amid a sandy desert, and inhabited by two or three gloomy officials, one of whom rang a terrific peal upon a harshly clanging bell as the train approached.

Mr. Audley was the only passenger who alighted at the dismal station. The train swept on to gayer scenes before the barrister had time to collect his scattered senses, or to pick up the portmanteau which had been discovered with some difficulty amid a black cavern of luggage only illuminated by one lantern.

"I wonder whether settlers in the back-woods of America feel as solitary and strange as I feel to-night?" he thought, as he stared hopelessly about him in the darkness.

He called to one of the officials, and pointed to his portmanteau.

"Will you carry that to the nearest hotel for me?" he asked—"that is to say, if I can get a good bed there."

The man laughed as he shouldered the portmanteau.

"You could get thirty beds, I daresay, sir, if you wanted 'em," he said. "We ain't over busy at Wildernsea at this time o' year. This way, sir."

The porter opened a wooden door in the station wall, and Robert Audley found himself upon a wide bowling-green of smooth grass, which surrounded a huge square building that loomed darkly on him through the winter's night, its black solidity only relieved by two lighted windows, far apart from each other, and glimmering redly like beacons on the darkness.

"This is the Victoria Hotel, sir," said the porter. "You wouldn't believe the crowds of company we have down here in the summer."

In the face of the bare grass-plat, the tenantless wooden alcoves, and the dark windows of the hotel, it was indeed rather difficult to imagine that the place was ever gay with merry people taking pleasure in the bright summer weather; but Robert Audley declared himself willing to believe anything the porter pleased to tell him, and followed his guide meekly to a little door at

the side of the big hotel, which led into a comfortable bar, where the humbler classes of summer visitors were accommodated with such refreshments as they pleased to pay for, without running the gauntlet of the prim, white-waistcoated waiters on guard at the principal entrance.

But there were very few attendants retained at the hotel in this bleak February season, and it was the landlord himself who ushered Robert into a dreary wilderness of polished mahogany tables and horsehair-cushioned chairs, which he called the coffee room.

Mr. Audley seated himself close to the wide steel fender, and stretched his cramped legs upon the hearthrug, while the landlord drove the poker into the vast pile of coal, and sent a ruddy blaze roaring upward through the chimney.

"If you would prefer a private room, sir—" the man began.

"No, thank you," said Robert, indifferently; "this room seems quite private enough just now. If you will order me a mutton chop and a pint of sherry, I shall be obliged."

"Certainly sir."

"And I shall be still more obliged if you will favour me with a few minutes' conversation before you do so."

"With very great pleasure, sir," the landlord answered, good-naturedly. "We see so very little company at this season of the year, that we are only too glad to oblige those gentlemen who do visit us. Any information which I can afford you respecting the neighbourhood of Wildernsea and its attractions," added the landlord, unconsciously quoting a small hand-book of the watering place which he sold in the bar, "I shall be most happy to—."

"But I don't want to know anything about the neighbourhood of Wildernsea," interrupted Robert, with a feeble protest against the landlord's volubility. "I want to ask you a few questions about some people who once lived here."

The landlord bowed and smiled, with an air which implied his readiness to recite the biographies of all the inhabitants of the

little seaport, if required by Mr. Audley to do so.

"How many years have you lived here?" Robert asked, taking his memorandum-book from his pocket. "Will it annoy you if I make notes of your replies to my questions?"

"Not at all, sir," replied the landlord, with a pompous enjoyment of the air of solemnity and importance which pervaded this business. "Any information which I can afford that is likely to be of ultimate value—"

"Yes, thank you," Robert murmured, interrupting the flow of words. "You have lived here—"

"Six years, sir."

"Since the year fifty-three."

"Since November in the year fifty-two, sir. I was in business in Hull prior to that time. This house was only completed in the October before I entered it."

"Do you remember a lieutenant in the navy, on half-pay I believe at that time, called Maldon?"

"Captain Maldon, sir?"

"Yes, commonly called Captain Maldon. I see you do remember him."

"Yes, sir. Captain Maldon was one of our best customers. He used to spend his evenings in this very room, though the walls were damp at that time, and we weren't able to paper the place for nearly a twelvemonth afterwards. His daughter married a young officer that came here with his regiment at Christmas time in fifty-two. They were married here, sir, and they travelled on the Continent for six months, and came back here again. But the gentleman ran away to Australia, and left the lady, a week or two after her baby was born. The business made quite a sensation in Wildernsea, sir, and Mrs.—Mrs.—I forget the name—"

"Mrs. Talboys," suggested Robert.

"To be sure, sir, Mrs. Talboys. Mrs. Talboys was very much pitied by the Wildernsea folks, sir, I was going to say, for she was very pretty, and had such nice winning ways, that she was a favourite with everybody who knew her."

"Can you tell me how long Mr. Maldon and his daughter remained at Wildernsea after Mr. Talboys left them?" Robert asked.

"Well—no, sir," answered the landlord, after a few moments' deliberation. "I can't say exactly how long it was. I know Mr. Maldon used to sit here in this very parlour, and tell people how badly his daughter had been treated, and how he'd been deceived by a young man he'd put so much confidence in; but I can't say how long it was before he left Wildernsea. But Mrs. Barkamb could tell you, sir," added the landlord, briskly.

"Mrs. Barkamb?"

"Yes, Mrs. Barkamb is the person who owns No. 17, North Cottages, the house in which Mr. Maldon and his daughter lived. She's a nice, civil-spoken, motherly woman, sir, and I'm sure she'll tell you anything you may want to know."

"Thank you, I will call upon Mrs. Barkamb to-morrow. Stay—one more question. Should you recognise Mrs. Talboys if you were to see her?"

"Certainly, sir. As sure as I should recognise one of my own daughters."

Robert Audley wrote Mrs. Barkamb's address in his pocket-book, ate his solitary dinner, drank a couple of glasses of sherry, smoked a cigar, and then retired to the apartment in which a fire had been lighted for his comfort.

He soon fell asleep, worn out with the fatigue of hurrying from place to place during the last two days; but his slumber was not a heavy one, and he heard the disconsolate moaning of the wind upon the sandy wastes, and the long waves rolling in monotonously upon the flat shore. Mingling with these dismal sounds, the melancholy thoughts engendered by his joyless journey repeated themselves in ever-varying succession in the chaos of his slumbering brain, and made themselves into visions of things that never had been and never could be upon this earth; but which had some vague relation to real events, remembered by the sleeper.

In those troublesome dreams he saw Audley Court, rooted up from amidst the green pastures

and the shady hedgerows of Essex, standing bare and unprotected upon that desolate northern shore, threatened by the rapid rising of a boisterous sea, whose waves seemed gathering upward to descend and crush the house he loved. As the hurrying waves rolled nearer and nearer to the stately mansion, the sleeper saw a pale, starry face looking out of the silvery foam, and knew that it was my lady, transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction. Beyond that rising sea great masses of cloud, blacker than the blackest ink, more dense than the darkest night, lowered upon the dreamer's eye; but as he looked at the dismal horizon the storm clouds slowly parted, and from a narrow rent in the darkness a ray of light streamed out upon the hideous waves, which slowly, very slowly, receded, leaving the old mansion safe and firmly rooted on the shore.

Robert awoke with the memory of this dream in his mind, and a sensation of physical relief, as if some heavy weight, which had oppressed him all the night, had been lifted from his breast.

He fell asleep again, and did not awake until the broad winter sunlight shone upon the window-blind, and the shrill voice of the chambermaid at his door announced that it was half-past eight o'clock. At a quarter before ten he had left the Victoria Hotel, and was making his way along the lonely platform in front of a row of shadowless houses that faced the sea.

This row of hard, uncompromising, square-built habitations stretched away to the little harbour, in which two or three merchant vessels and a couple of colliers were anchored. Beyond the harbour there loomed, grey and cold upon the wintry horizon, a dismal barrack, parted from the Wildernsea houses by a narrow creek, spanned by an iron draw-bridge. The scarlet coat of the sentinel who walked backwards and forwards between two cannons, placed at remote angles before the barrack wall, was the only scrap of colour that relieved the neutral-tinted picture of the grey stone houses and the leaden sea.

On one side of the harbour a long stone pier

stretched out far away into the cruel loneliness of the sea, as if built for the especial accommodation of some modern Timon, too misanthropical to be satisfied even by the solitude of Wildernsea, and anxious to get still further away from his fellow-creatures.

It was on that pier George Talboys had first met his wife, under the yellow glory of a sunny sky, and to the music of a braying band. It was there that the young cornet had first yielded to that sweet delusion, that fatal infatuation which had exercised so dark an influence upon his after-life.

Robert looked savagely at the solitary watering-place—the shabby seaport.

"It is such a place as this," he thought, "that works a strong man's ruin. He comes here, heart whole and happy, with no better experience of woman than is to be learnt at a flower-show or in a ball-room; with no more familiar knowledge of the creature than he has of the far-away satellites of the remoter planets; with a vague notion that she is a whirling teetotum in pink or

blue gauze, or a graceful automaton for the display of milliners' manufacture. He comes to some place of this kind, and the universe is suddenly narrowed into about half a dozen acres; the mighty scheme of creation is crushed into a bandbox. The far-away creatures whom he had seen floating about him, beautiful and indistinct, are brought under his very nose; and before he has time to recover his bewilderment, hey, presto! the witchcraft has begun: the magic circle is drawn around him, the spells are at work, the whole formula of sorcery is in full play, and the victim is as powerless to escape as the marble-legged prince in the Eastern story."

Ruminating in this wise, Robert Audley reached the house to which he had been directed as the residence of Mrs. Barkamb. He was admitted immediately by a prim, elderly servant, who ushered him into a sitting-room as prim and elderly-looking as herself. Mrs. Barkamb, a comfortable matron of about sixty years of age, was sitting in an arm-chair before a bright handful of fire in the shining grate. An elderly

terrier, whose black-and-tan coat was thickly sprinkled with grey, reposed in Mrs. Barkamb's lap. Every object in the quiet sitting-room had an elderly aspect; an aspect of simple comfort and precision, which is the evidence of outward repose.

"I should like to live here," Robert thought, "and watch the grey sea slowly rolling over the grey sand under the still grey sky. I should like to live here, and tell the beads upon my rosary, and repent and rest."

He seated himself in the arm-chair opposite Mrs. Barkamb, at that lady's invitation, and placed his hat upon the ground. The elderly terrier descended from his mistress's lap to bark at and otherwise take objection to this hat.

"You were wishing, I suppose, sir, to take one —be quiet, Dash—one of the cottages," suggested Mrs. Barkamb, whose mind ran in one narrow groove, and whose life during the last twenty years had been an unvarying round of house-letting.

Robert Audley explained the purpose of his visit.

"I come to ask one simple question," he said, in conclusion. "I wish to discover the exact date of Mrs. Talboys' departure from Wildernsea. The proprietor of the Victoria Hotel informed me that you were the most likely person to afford me that information."

Mrs. Barkamb deliberated for some moments.

"I can give you the date of Captain Maldon's departure," she said, "for he left No. 17 considerably in my debt, and I have the whole business in black and white; but with regard to Mrs. Talboys——"

Mrs. Barkamb paused for a few moments before resuming.

"You are aware that Mrs. Talboys left rather abruptly?" she asked.

"I was not aware of that fact."

"Indeed! Yes, she left abruptly, poor little woman! She tried to support herself after her husband's desertion by giving music lessons; she was a very brilliant pianist, and succeeded pretty

well, I believe. But I suppose her father took her money from her, and spent it in public-houses. However that might be, they had a very serious misunderstanding one night; and the next morning Mrs. Talboys left Wildernsea, leaving her little boy, who was out at nurse in the neighbourhood."

"But you cannot tell me the date of her departure?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Mrs. Barkamb; "and yet, stay. Captain Maldon wrote to me upon the day his daughter left. He was in very great distress, poor old gentleman, and he always came to me in his troubles. If I could find that letter, it might be dated, you know—mightn't it, now?"

Mr. Audley said that it was only probable the letter was dated.

Mrs. Barkamb retired to a table in the window on which stood an old-fashioned mahogany desk lined with green baize, and suffering from a plethora of documents, which oozed out of it in every direction. Letters, receipts, bills, inven-

tories, and tax-papers were mingled in hopeless confusion; and amongst these Mrs. Barkamb set to work to search for Captain Maldon's letter.

Mr. Audley waited very patiently, watching the grey clouds sailing across the grey sky, the grey vessels gliding past upon the grey sea.

After about ten minutes' search, and a great deal of rustling, crackling, folding and unfolding of the papers, Mrs. Barkamb uttered an exclamation of triumph.

"I've got the letter," she said; "and there's a note inside it from Mrs. Talboys."

Robert Audley's pale face flushed a vivid crimson as he stretched out his hand to receive the papers.

"The person who stole Helen Maldon's love-letters from George's trunk in my chambers might have spared themselves the trouble," he thought.

The letter from the old lieutenant was not long, but almost every other word was underscored.

"My generous friend," the writer began—

[Mr. Maldon had tried the lady's generosity pretty severely during his residence in her house, rarely paying his rent until threatened with the intruding presence of the broker's man.]

"I am in the *depths* of *despair*. My daughter has *left me!* You may *imagine* my *feelings!* We had a *few words* last night upon the subject of *money matters*, which subject has always been a *disagreeable* one between us, and on rising this morning I found that I was *deserted!* The *enclosed* from Helen was waiting for me on the parlour table.

"Yours in *distraction* and *despair*,

"HENRY MALDON.

"North Cottages,
August 16th, 1854."

The note from Mrs. Talboys was still more brief. It began abruptly thus:—

"I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out into the world, dissevered from every link which binds me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another

fortune. Forgive me if I have been fretful, capricious, changeable. You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* which is the key to my life.

"HELEN TALBOYS."

These lines were written in a hand that Robert Audley knew only too well.

He sat for a long time pondering silently over the letter written by Helen Talboys.

What was the meaning of those two last sentences—"You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* which is the key to my life?"

He wearied his brain in endeavouring to find a clue to the signification of those two sentences. He could remember nothing, nor could he imagine anything that would throw a light upon their meaning. The date of Helen's departure, according to Mr. Maldon's letter, was the 16th of August, 1854. Miss Tonks had declared that Lucy Graham entered the school at Crescent Villas upon the 17th or 18th of August in the

same year. Between the departure of Helen Talboys from the Yorkshire watering-place, and the arrival of Lucy Graham at the Brompton school, not more than eight-and-forty hours could have elapsed. This made a very small link in the chain of circumstantial evidence, perhaps; but it was a link, nevertheless, and it fitted neatly into its place.

"Did Mr. Maldon hear from his daughter after she had left Wildernsea?" Robert asked.

"Well, I believe he did hear from her," Mrs. Barkamb answered; "but I didn't see much of the old gentleman after that August. I was obliged to sell him up in November, poor fellow, for he owed me fifteen months' rent; and it was only by selling his poor little bits of furniture that I could get him out of my place. We parted very good friends, in spite of my sending in the brokers; and the old gentleman went to London with the child, who was scarcely a twelvemonth old."

Mrs. Barkamb had nothing more to tell, and Robert had no further questions to ask. He

requested permission to retain the two letters written by the lieutenant and his daughter, and left the house with them in his pocket-book.

He walked straight back to the hotel, where he called for a time-table. An express for London left Wildernsea at a quarter-past one. Robert sent his portmanteau to the station, paid his bill, and walked up and down the stone terrace fronting the sea, waiting for the starting of the train.

"I have traced the histories of Lucy Graham and Helen Talboys to a vanishing point," he thought; "my next business is to discover the history of the woman who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard."

CHAPTER X.

HIDDEN IN THE GRAVE.

Upon his return from Wildernsea, Robert Audley found a letter from his cousin, Alicia, awaiting him at his chambers.

"Papa is much better," the young lady wrote, "and is very anxious to have you at the Court. For some inexplicable reason, my step-mother has taken it into her head that your presence is extremely desirable, and worries me with her frivolous questions about your movements. So pray come without delay, and set these people at rest. Your affectionate cousin, A. A."

"So my lady is anxious to know my movements," thought Robert Audley, as he sat brooding and smoking by his lonely fireside. "She is anxious; and she questions her step-daughter in that pretty, childlike manner which has such a bewitching air of innocent frivolity. Poor little

creature; poor unhappy little golden-haired sinner; the battle between us seems terribly unfair. Why doesn't she run away while there is still time? I have given her fair warning, I have shown her my cards, and worked openly enough in this business, Heaven knows. Why doesn't she run away?"

He repeated this question again and again as he filled and emptied his meerschaum, surrounding himself with the blue vapour from his pipe, until he looked like some modern magician, seated in his laboratory.

"Why doesn't she run away? I would bring no needless shame upon that house, of all other houses upon this wide earth. I would only do my duty to my missing friend, and to that brave and generous man who has pledged his faith to a worthless woman. Heaven knows I have no wish to punish. Heaven knows I was never born to be the avenger of guilt or the persecutor of the guilty. I only wish to do my duty. I will give her one more warning, a full and fair one and then——"

His thoughts wandered away to that gloomy prospect in which he saw no gleam of brightness to relieve the dull, black obscurity that encompassed the future, shutting in his pathway on every side, and spreading a dense curtain around and about him, which Hope was powerless to penetrate. He was for ever haunted by the vision of his uncle's anguish, for ever tortured by the thought of that ruin and desolation, which, being brought about by his instrumentality, would seem in a manner his handiwork. But amid all, and through all, Clara Talboys, with an imperious gesture, beckoned him onwards to her brother's unknown grave.

"Shall I go down to Southampton," he thought, "and endeavour to discover the history of the woman who died at Ventnor? Shall I work underground, bribing the paltry assistants in that foul conspiracy, until I find my way to the thrice guilty principal? No! not till I have tried other means of discovering the truth. Shall I go to that miserable old man, and charge him with his share in the shameful trick which I

believe to have been played upon my poor friend? No; I will not torture that terror-stricken wretch as I tortured him a few weeks ago. I will go straight to the arch conspirator, and will tear away the beautiful veil under which she hides her wickedness, and will wring from her the secret of my friend's fate and banish her for ever from the house which her presence has polluted."

He started early the next morning for Essex, and reached Audley before eleven o'clock.

Early as it was, my lady was out. She had gone to Chelmsford upon a shopping expedition with her step-daughter. She had several calls to make in the neighbourhood of the town, and was not likely to return until dinner-time. Sir Michael's health was very much improved, and he would come down-stairs in the afternoon. Would Mr. Audley go to his uncle's room?

No; Robert had no wish to meet that generous kinsman. What could he say to him? How could he smooth the way to the trouble that was to come?—how soften the cruel blow of the great

grief that was preparing for that noble and trusting heart?

"If I could forgive her the wrong done to my friend," Robert thought, "I should still abhor her for the misery her guilt must bring upon the man who has believed in her."

He told his uncle's servant that he would stroll into the village, and return before dinner. He walked slowly away from the Court, wandering across the meadows between his uncle's house and the village, purposeless and indifferent, with the great trouble and perplexity of his life stamped upon his face and reflected in his manner.

"I will go into the churchyard," he thought "and stare at the tombstones. There is nothing I can do that will make me more gloomy than I am."

He was in those very meadows through which he had hurried from Audley Court to the station upon the September day in which George Talboys had disappeared. He looked at the pathway by which he had gone upon that day, and remembered his unaccustomed hurry, and the vague

feeling of terror which had taken possession of him immediately upon losing sight of his friend.

"Why did that unaccountable terror seize upon me?" he thought. "Why was it that I saw some strange mystery in my friend's disappearance? Was it a monition or a monomania? What if I am wrong after all? What if this chain of evidence which I have constructed link by link, is woven out of my own folly? What if this edifice of horror and suspicion is a mere collection of crotchets—the nervous fancies of a hypochondriacal bachelor? Mr. Harcourt Talboys sees no meaning in the events out of which I have created a horrible mystery. I lay the separate links of the chain before him, and he cannot recognise their fitness. He is unable to put them together. Oh, my God, if it should be in myself all this time that the misery lies; if——" he smiled bitterly, and shook his head. "I have the handwriting in my pocket-book which is the evidence of the conspiracy," he thought. "It remains for me to discover the darker half of my lady's secret."

He avoided the village, still keeping to the meadows. The church lay a little way back from the straggling High Street, and a rough wooden gate opened from the churchyard into a broad meadow, that was bordered by a running stream, and sloped down into a grassy valley dotted by groups of cattle.

Robert slowly ascended the narrow hill-side pathway leading up to the gate in the churchyard. The quiet dulness of the lonely landscape harmonised with his own gloom. The solitary figure of an old man hobbling towards a stile at the further end of the wide meadow was the only human creature visible upon the area over which the young barrister looked. The smoke slowly ascending from the scattered houses in the long High Street was the only evidence of human life. The slow progress of the hands of the old clock in the church steeple was the only token by which a traveller could perceive that the sluggish course of rural time had not come to a full stop in the village of Audley.

Yes, there was one other sign. As Robert

opened the gate of the churchyard, and strolled listlessly into the little enclosure, he became aware of the solemn music of an organ, audible through a half-open window in the steeple.

He stopped and listened to the slow harmonies of a dreamy melody that sounded like an extempore composition of an accomplished player.

"Who would have believed that Audley church could boast such an organ?" thought Robert. "When last I was here, the national schoolmaster used to accompany his children by a primitive performance of common chords. I didn't think the old organ had such music in it."

He lingered at the gate, not caring to break the lazy spell woven about him by the monotonous melancholy of the organist's performance. The tones of the instrument, now swelling to their fullest power, now sinking to a low, whispering softness, floated towards him upon the misty winter atmosphere, and had a soothing influence, that seemed to comfort him in his trouble.

He closed the gate softly, and crossed the little patch of gravel before the door of the church.

This door had been left ajar—by the organist, perhaps. Robert Audley pushed it open, and walked into the square porch, from which a flight of narrow stone steps wound upwards to the organ-loft and the belfry. Mr. Audley took off his hat, and opened the door between the porch and the body of the church. He stepped softly into the holy edifice, which had a damp, mouldy smell upon week-days. He walked down the narrow aisle to the altar-rails, and from that point of observation took a survey of the church. The little gallery was exactly opposite to him, but the scanty green curtains before the organ were closely drawn, and he could not get a glimpse of the player.

The music still rolled on. The organist had wandered into a melody of Mendelssohn's, a strain whose dreamy sadness went straight to Robert's heart. He loitered in the nooks and corners of the church, examining the dilapidated memorials of the well-nigh forgotten dead, and listening to this music.

"If my poor friend, George Talboys, had died

in my arms, and I had buried him in this quiet church, in one of the vaults over which I tread to-day, how much anguish of mind, vacillation, and torment I might have escaped," thought Robert Audley, as he read the faded inscriptions upon tablets of discoloured marble: "I should have known his fate—I should have known his fate! Ah, how much there would have been in that. It is this miserable uncertainty, this horrible suspicion, which has poisoned my very life."

He looked at his watch.

"Half-past one," he muttered. "I shall have to wait four or five dreary hours before my lady comes home from her morning calls. Her morning calls—her pretty visits of ceremony or friendliness. Good heavens! what an actress this woman is. What an arch trickster—what an all-accomplished deceiver. But she shall play her pretty comedy no longer under my uncle's roof. I have diplomatised long enough. She has refused to accept an indirect warning. To-night I will speak plainly."

The music of the organ ceased, and Robert heard the closing of the instrument.

"I'll have a look at this new organist," he thought, "who can afford to bury his talents at Audley, and play Mendelssohn's finest fugues for a stipend of sixteen pounds a-year." He lingered in the porch, waiting for the organist to descend the awkward little staircase. In the weary trouble of his mind, and with the prospect of getting through the five hours in the best way he could, Mr. Audley was glad to cultivate any diversion of thought, however idle. He therefore freely indulged his curiosity about the new organist.

The first person who appeared upon the steep stone steps was a boy in corduroy trousers and a dark linen smock-frock, who shambled down the stairs with a good deal of unnecessary clatter of his hobnailed shoes, and who was red in the face from the exertion of blowing the bellows of the old organ. Close behind this boy came a young lady, very plainly dressed in a black silk gown and a large grey shawl, who started and turned pale at the sight of Mr. Audley.

This young lady was Clara Talboys.

Of all people in the world she was the last whom Robert either expected or wished to see. She had told him that she was going to pay a visit to some friends who lived in Essex; but the county is a wide one, and the village of Audley one of the most obscure and least frequented spots in the whole of its extent. That the sister of his lost friend should be here—here where she could watch his every action, and from those actions deduce the secret workings of his mind, tracing his doubts home to their object—made a complication of his difficulties that he could never have anticipated. It brought him back to that consciousness of his own helplessness, in which he had exclaimed—

"A hand that is stronger than my own is beckoning me onward on the dark road that leads to my lost friend's unknown grave."

Clara Talboys was the first to speak.

"You are surprised to see me here, Mr. Audley," she said.

"Very much surprised."

"I told you that I was coming to Essex. I left home the day before yesterday. I was leaving home when I received your telegraphic message. The friend with whom I am staying is Mrs. Martyn, the wife of the new rector of Mount Stanning. I came down this morning to see the village and church, and as Mrs. Martyn had to pay a visit to the schools with the curate and his wife, I stopped here and amused myself by trying the old organ. I was not aware till I came here that there was a village called Audley. The place takes its name from your family, I suppose?"

"I believe so," Robert answered, wondering at the lady's calmness, in contradistinction to his own embarrassment. "I have a vague recollection of hearing the story of some ancestor who was called Audley of Audley in the reign of Edward the Fourth. The tomb inside the rails near the altar belongs to one of the knights of Audley, but I have never taken the trouble to remember his achievements. Are you going to wait here for your friends, Miss Talboys?"

"Yes; they are to return here for me after they have finished their rounds."

"And you go back to Mount Stanning with them this afternoon?"

"Yes."

Robert stood with his hat in his hand looking absently out at the tombstones and the low wall of the churchyard. Clara Talboys watched his pale face, haggard under the deepening shadow that had rested upon it so long.

"You have been ill since I saw you last, Mr. Audley," she said, in a low voice, that had the same melodious sadness as the notes of the old organ under her touch.

"No, I have not been ill; I have been only harassed, wearied by a hundred doubts and perplexities."

He was thinking as he spoke to her—"How much does she guess? how much does she suspect?"

He had told the story of George's disappearance and of his own suspicions, suppressing only the names of those concerned in the mystery;

but what if this girl should fathom the slender disguise, and discover for herself that which he had chosen to withhold?

Her grave eyes were fixed upon his face, and he knew that she was trying to read the innermost secrets of his mind.

"What am I in her hands?" he thought. "What am I in the hands of this woman, who has my lost friend's face and the manner of Pallas Athenè? She reads my pitiful, vacillating soul, and plucks the thoughts out of my heart with the magic of her solemn brown eyes. How unequal the fight must be between us, and how can I ever hope to conquer against the strength of her beauty and her wisdom?"

Mr. Audley was clearing his throat preparatory to bidding his beautiful companion good morning, and making his escape from the thraldom of her presence into the lonely meadow outside the churchyard, when Clara Talboys arrested him by speaking upon that very subject which he was most anxious to avoid.

"You promised to write to me, Mr. Audley,"

she said, "if you made any discovery which carried you nearer to the mystery of my brother's disappearance. You have not written to me, and I imagine, therefore, that you have discovered nothing."

Robert Audley was silent for some moments. How could he answer this direct question?

"The chain of circumstantial evidence which unites the mystery of your brother's fate with the person whom I suspect," he said, after a pause, "is formed of very slight links. I think that I have added another link to that chain since I saw you in Dorsetshire."

"And you refuse to tell me what it is that you have discovered."

"Only until I have discovered more."

"I thought from your message that you were going to Wildernsea."

"I have been there."

"Indeed! It was there that you made some discovery, then?"

"It was," answered Robert. "You must remember, Miss Talboys, that the sole ground

upon which my suspicions rest is the identity of two individuals who have no apparent connection—the identity of a person who is supposed to be dead with one who is living. The conspiracy of which I believe your brother to have been the victim hinges upon this. If his wife, Helen Talboys, died when the papers recorded her death—if the woman who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard was indeed the woman whose name is inscribed on the headstone of the grave—I have no case, I have no clue to the mystery of your brother's fate. I am about to put this to the test. I believe that I am now in a position to play a bold game, and I believe that I shall soon arrive at the truth."

He spoke in a low voice, and with a solemn emphasis that betrayed the intensity of his feeling. Miss Talboys stretched out her ungloved hand, and laid it in his own. The cold touch of that slender hand sent a shivering thrill through his frame.

"You will not suffer my brother's fate to remain a mystery, Mr. Audley," she said quietly.

"I know that you will do your duty to your friend."

The rector's wife and her two companions entered the churchyard as Clara Talboys said this. Robert Audley pressed the hand that rested in his own, and raised it to his lips.

"I am a lazy, good-for-nothing fellow, Miss Talboys," he said; "but if I could restore your brother George to life and happiness, I should care very little for any sacrifice of my own feeling. I fear that the most I can do is to fathom the secret of his fate; and in doing that I must sacrifice those who are dearer to me than myself."

He put on his hat and hurried away through the gateway leading into the field as Mrs. Marty came up to the porch.

"Who is that handsome young man I caught *tête-à-tête* with you, Clara?" she asked, laughing.

"He is a Mr. Audley, a friend of my poor brother's."

"Indeed! He is some relation of Sir Michael Audley, I suppose?"

"Sir Michael Audley!"

"Yes, my dear; the most important personage in the parish of Audley. But we'll call at the Court in a day or two, and you shall see the baronet and his pretty young wife."

"His young wife!" repeated Clara Talboys, looking earnestly at her friend. "Has Sir Michael Audley lately married?"

"Yes. He was a widower for sixteen years, and married a penniless young governess about a year and a half ago. The story is quite romantic, and Lady Audley is considered the belle of the county. But come, my dear Clara, the pony is tired of waiting for us, and we've a long drive before dinner."

Clara Talboys took her seat in the little basket-carriage which was waiting at the principal gate of the churchyard in the care of the boy who had blown the organ-bellows. Mrs. Martyn shook the reins, and the sturdy chestnut cob trotted off in the direction of Mount Stanning.

"Will you tell me more about this Lady Audley, Fanny?" Miss Talboys said, after a long

pause. "I want to know all about her. Have you heard her maiden name?"

"Yes; she was a Miss Graham."

"And she is very pretty?"

"Yes, very, very pretty. Rather a childish beauty though, with large clear blue eyes, and pale golden ringlets, that fall in a feathery shower over her throat and shoulders."

Clara Talboys was silent. She did not ask any further questions about my lady.

She was thinking of a passage in that letter which George had written to her during his honeymoon—a passage in which he said:—"My childish little wife is watching me as I write this. Ah! how I wish you could see her, Clara! Her eyes are as blue and as clear as the skies on a bright summer's day, and her hair falls about her face like the pale golden halo you see round the head of a Madonna in an Italian picture."

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE LIME-WALK.

Robert Audley was loitering upon the broad grass-plat in front of the Court as the carriage containing my lady and Alicia drove under the archway, and drew up at the low turret-door. Mr. Audley presented himself in time to hand the ladies out of the vehicle.

My lady looked very pretty in a delicate blue bonnet and the sables which her nephew had bought for her at St. Petersburg. She seemed very well pleased to see Robert, and smiled most bewitchingly as she gave him her exquisitely gloved little hand.

"So you have come back to us, truant?" she said, laughing. "And now that you have returned, we shall keep you prisoner. We won't let him run away again, will we, Alicia?"

Miss Audley gave her head a scornful toss,

that shook the heavy curls under her cavalier hat.

"I have nothing to do with the movements of so erratic an individual," she said. "Since Robert Audley has taken it into his head to conduct himself like some ghost-haunted hero in a German story, I have given up attempting to understand him."

Mr. Audley looked at his cousin with an expression of serio-comic perplexity. "She's a nice girl," he thought, "but she's a nuisance. I don't know how it is, but she seems more a nuisance than she used to be."

He pulled his mustachios reflectively as he considered this question. His mind wandered away for a few moments from the great trouble of his life to dwell upon this minor perplexity.

"She's a dear girl," he thought; "a generous-hearted, bouncing, noble English lassie, and yet ——" He lost himself in a quagmire of doubt and difficulty. There was some hitch in his mind which he could not understand; some change in himself, beyond the change made in him by his

anxiety about George Talboys, which mystified and bewildered him.

"And pray where have you been wandering during the last day or two, Mr. Audley?" asked my lady, as she lingered with her step-daughter upon the threshold of the turret door, waiting until Robert should be pleased to stand aside and allow them to pass. The young man started as she asked this question and looked up at her suddenly. Something in the aspect of her bright young beauty, something in the childish innocence of her expression, seemed to smite him to the heart, and his face grew pale as he looked at her.

"I have been——in Yorkshire," he said; "at the little watering place where my poor friend George Talboys lived at the time of his marriage."

The white change in my lady's face was the only sign of her having heard these words. She smiled, a faint, sickly smile, and tried to pass her husband's nephew.

"I must dress for dinner," she said. "I am

going to a dinner-party, Mr. Audley; please let me go in."

"I must ask you to spare me half-an-hour, Lady Audley," Robert answered, in a low voice. "I came down to Essex on purpose to speak to you."

"What about?" asked my lady.

She had recovered herself from any shock which she might have sustained a few moments before, and it was in her usual manner that she asked this question. Her face expressed the mingled bewilderment and curiosity of a puzzled child, rather than the serious surprise of a woman.

"What can you want to talk to me about, Mr. Audley?" she repeated.

"I will tell you when we are alone," Robert said, glancing at his cousin, who stood a little way behind my lady, watching this confidential little dialogue.

"He is in love with my step-mother's wax-doll beauty," thought Alicia, "and it is for her sake he has become such a disconsolate object. He's

just the sort of person to fall in love with his aunt!"

Miss Audley walked away to the grass-plat, turning her back upon Robert and my lady.

"The absurd creature turned as white as a sheet when he saw her," she thought. "So he can be in love, after all. That slow lump of torpidity he calls his heart can beat, I suppose, once in a quarter of a century: but it seems that nothing but a blue-eyed wax-doll can set it going. I should have given him up long ago if I'd known that his ideal of beauty was to be found in a toy-shop."

Poor Alicia crossed the grass-plat and disappeared upon the opposite side of the quadrangle, where there was a Gothic gate that communicated with the stables. I am sorry to say that Sir Michael Audley's daughter went to seek consolation from her dog Cæsar and her chestnut mare Atalanta, whose loose box the young lady was in the habit of visiting every day.

"Will you come into the lime-walk, Lady Audley?" said Robert, as his cousin left the

garden. "I wish to talk to you without fear of interruption or observation. I think we could choose no safer place than that. Will you come there with me?"

"If you please," answered my lady. Mr. Audley could see that she was trembling, and that she glanced from side to side, as if looking for some outlet by which she might escape him.

"You are shivering, Lady Audley," he said.

"Yes, I am very cold. I would rather speak to you some other day, please. Let it be to-morrow, if you will. I have to dress for dinner, and I want to see Sir Michael; I have not seen him since ten o'clock this morning. Please let it be to-morrow."

There was a painful piteousness in her tone. Heaven knows how painful to Robert's heart. Heaven knows what horrible images arose in his mind as he looked down at that fair young face and thought of the task that lay before him.

"I *must* speak to you, Lady Audley," he said. "If I am cruel, it is you who have made me cruel. You might have escaped this ordeal. You might

have avoided me. I gave you fair warning. But you have chosen to defy me, and it is your own folly which is to blame if I no longer spare you. Come with me. I tell you again I must speak to you."

There was a cold determination in his tone which silenced my lady's objections. She followed him submissively to the little iron gate which communicated with the long garden behind the house—the garden in which a little rustic wooden bridge led across the quiet fish-pond into the lime-walk.

The early winter twilight was closing in, and the intricate tracery of the leafless branches that overarched the lonely pathway looked black against the cold grey of the evening sky. The lime-walk seemed like some cloister in this uncertain light.

"Why do you bring me to this horrible place to frighten me out of my poor wits?" cried my lady, peevishly. "You ought to know how nervous I am."

"You are nervous, my lady?"

"Yes, dreadfully nervous. I am worth a fortune to poor Mr. Dawson. He is always sending me camphor, and sal volatile, and red lavender, and all kinds of abominable mixtures, but he can't cure me."

"Do you remember what Macbeth tells his physician, my lady?" asked Robert, gravely. "Mr. Dawson may be very much more clever than the Scottish leech; but I doubt if even *he* can minister to the mind that is diseased."

"Who said that my mind was diseased?" exclaimed Lady Audley.

"I say so, my lady," answered Robert. "You tell me that you are nervous, and that all the medicines your doctor can prescribe are only so much physic that might as well be thrown to the dogs. Let me be the physician to strike to the root of your malady, Lady Audley. Heaven knows that I wish to be merciful—that I would spare you as far as it is in my power to spare you in doing justice to others—but justice must be done. Shall I tell you why you are nervous in this house, my lady?"

"If you can," she answered, with a little laugh.

"Because for you this house is haunted."

"Haunted?"

"Yes, haunted by the ghost of George Talboys."

Robert Audley heard my lady's quickened breathing, he fancied he could almost hear the loud beating of her heart as she walked by his side, shivering now and then, and with her sable cloak wrapped tightly round her.

"What do you mean?" she cried suddenly, after a pause of some moments. "Why do you torment me about this George Talboys, who happens to have taken it into his head to keep out of your way for a few months? Are you going mad, Mr. Audley, and do you select me as the victim of your monomania? What is George Talboys to me that you should worry me about him?"

"He was a stranger to you, my lady, was he not?"

"Of course!" answered Lady Audley. "What should he be but a stranger?"

"Shall I tell you the story of my friend's disappearance as I read that story, my lady?" asked Robert.

"No," cried Lady Audley; "I wish to know nothing of your friend. If he is dead I am sorry for him. If he lives, I have no wish either to see him or to hear of him. Let me go in to see my husband, if you please, Mr. Audley; unless you wish to detain me in this gloomy place until I catch my death of cold."

"I wish to detain you until you have heard what I have to say, Lady Audley," answered Robert, resolutely. "I will detain you no longer than is necessary; and when you have heard me, you shall choose your own course of action."

"Very well, then; pray lose no time in saying what you have to say," replied my lady, carelessly. "I promise to attend very patiently."

"When my friend George Talboys returned to England," Robert began gravely, "the thought

which was uppermost in his mind was the thought of his wife."

"Whom he had deserted," said my lady quickly. "At least," she added, more deliberately, "I remember your telling us something to that effect when you first told us your friend's story."

Robert Audley did not notice this interruption.

"The thought that was uppermost in his mind was the thought of his wife," he repeated. "His fairest hope in the future was the hope of making her happy, and lavishing upon her the fortune which he had won by the force of his own strong arm in the gold-fields of Australia. I saw him within a few hours of his reaching England, and I was a witness of the joyful pride with which he looked forward to his reunion with his wife. I was also a witness of the blow which struck him to the very heart—which changed him from the man he had been, to a creature as unlike that former self as one human being can be unlike another. The blow which made that cruel change was the announcement of his wife's death in the

Times newspaper. I now believe that that announcement was a black and bitter lie."

"Indeed!" said my lady; "and what reason could any one have for announcing the death of Mrs. Talboys, if Mrs. Talboys had been alive?"

"The lady herself might have had a reason," Robert answered, quietly.

"What reason?"

"How if she had taken advantage of George's absence to win a richer husband? How if she had married again, and wished to throw my poor friend off the scent by this false announcement?"

Lady Audley shrugged her shoulders.

"Your suppositions are rather ridiculous, Mr. Audley," she said; "it is to be hoped that you have some reasonable grounds for them."

"I have examined a file of each of the newspapers published in Chelmsford and Colchester," continued Robert, without replying to my lady's last observation, "and I find in one of the Colchester papers, dated July the 2nd, 1857, a brief paragraph amongst numerous miscellaneous scraps

of information copied from other newspapers, to the effect that a Mr. George Talboys, an English gentleman, had arrived at Sydney from the gold-fields, carrying with him nuggets and gold-dust to the amount of twenty thousand pounds, and that he had realised his property and sailed for Liverpool in the fast-sailing clipper *Argus*. This is a very small fact of course, Lady Audley, but it is enough to prove that any person residing in Essex in the July of the year fifty-seven, was likely to become aware of George Talboys' return from Australia. Do you follow me?"

"Not very clearly," said my lady. "What have the Essex papers to do with the death of Mrs. Talboys?"

"We will come to that by-and-by, Lady Audley. I say that I believe the announcement in the *Times* to have been a false announcement, and a part of the conspiracy which was carried out by Helen Talboys and Lieutenant Maldon against my poor friend."

"A conspiracy!"

"Yes, a conspiracy concocted by an artful

woman, who had speculated upon the chances of her husband's death, and had secured a splendid position at the risk of committing a crime; a bold woman, my lady, who thought to play her comedy out to the end without fear of detection; a wicked woman, who did not care what misery she might inflict upon the honest heart of the man she betrayed; but a foolish woman, who looked at life as a game of chance, in which the best player was likely to hold the winning cards, forgetting that there is a Providence above the pitiful speculators, and that wicked secrets are never permitted to remain long hidden. If this woman of whom I speak had never been guilty of any blacker sin than the publication of that lying announcement in the *Times* newspaper, I should still hold her as the most detestable and despicable of her sex—the most pitiless and calculating of human creatures. That cruel lie was a base and cowardly blow in the dark; it was the treacherous dagger-thrust of an infamous assassin."

"But how do you know that the announcement was a false one?" asked my lady. "You

told us that you had been to Ventnor with Mr. Talboys to see his wife's grave. Who was it who died at Ventnor if it was not Mrs. Talboys?"

"Ah, Lady Audley," said Robert, "that is a question which only two or three people can answer, and one or other of those persons shall answer it to me before very long. I tell you, my lady, that I am determined to unravel the mystery of George Talboys' death. Do you think I am to be put off by feminine prevarication—by womanly trickery? No! Link by link I have put together the chain of evidence, which wants but a link here and there to be complete in its terrible strength. Do you think I will suffer myself to be baffled? Do you think I shall fail to discover those missing links? No, Lady Audley, I shall not fail, for *I know where to look for them!* There is a fair-haired woman at Southampton—a woman called Plowson, who has some share in the secrets of the father of my friend's wife. I have an idea that she can help me to discover the history of the woman who lies buried in Ventnor church-

yard, and I will spare no trouble in making that discovery; unless——"

"Unless what?" asked my lady, eagerly.

"Unless the woman I wish to save from degradation and punishment accepts the mercy I offer her, and takes warning while there is still time."

My lady shrugged her graceful shoulders, and flashed bright defiance out of her blue eyes.

"She would be a very foolish woman if she suffered herself to be influenced by any such absurdity," she said. "You are hypochondriacal, Mr. Audley, and you must take camphor, or red lavender, or sal volatile. What can be more ridiculous than this idea which you have taken into your head? You lose your friend George Talboys in rather a mysterious manner—that is to say, that gentleman chooses to leave England without giving you due notice. What of that? You confess that he became an altered man after his wife's death. He grew eccentric and misanthropical; he affected an utter indifference as to what became of him. What more likely, then,

that he grew tired of the monotony of civilised life, and ran away to those savage gold-fields to find a distraction for his grief? It is rather a romantic story, but by no means an uncommon one. But you are not satisfied with this simple interpretation of your friend's disappearance, and you build up some absurd theory of a conspiracy which has no existence except in your own over-heated brain. Helen Talboys is dead. The *Times* newspaper declares she is dead. Her own father tells you that she is dead. The headstone of the grave in Ventnor churchyard bears record of her death. By what right," cried my lady, her voice rising to that shrill and piercing tone peculiar to her when affected by any intense agitation—"by what right, Mr. Audley, do you come to me and torment me about George Talboys—by what right do you dare to say that his wife is still alive?"

"By the right of circumstantial evidence, Lady Audley," answered Robert—"by the right of that circumstantial evidence which will sometimes fix the guilt of a man's murder upon that person

who, on the first hearing of the case, seems of all other men the most unlikely to be guilty."

"What circumstantial evidence?"

"The evidence of time and place. The evidence of handwriting. When Helen Talboys left her father's house at Wildernsea, she left a letter behind her—a letter in which she declared that she was weary of her old life, and that she wished to seek a new home and a new fortune. That letter is in my possession."

"Indeed."

"Shall I tell you *whose* handwriting resembles that of Helen Talboys so closely, that the most dexterous expert could perceive no distinction between the two?"

"A resemblance between the handwriting of two women is no very uncommon circumstance now-a-days," replied my lady, carelessly. "I could show you the caligraphies of half-a-dozen of my female correspondents, and defy you to discover any great differences in them."

"But what if the handwriting is a very uncommon one, presenting marked peculiarities

by which it may be recognised among a hundred?"

"Why, in that case the coincidence is rather curious," answered my lady; "but it is nothing more than a coincidence. You cannot deny the fact of Helen Talboys' death on the ground that her handwriting resembles that of some surviving person."

"But if a series of such coincidences lead up to the same point," said Robert. "Helen Talboys left her father's house, according to the declaration in her own handwriting, because she was weary of her old life, and wished to begin a new one. Do you know what I infer from this?"

My lady shrugged her shoulders.

"I have not the least idea," she said; "and as you have detained me in this gloomy place nearly half-an-hour, I must beg that you will release me, and let me go and dress for dinner."

"No, Lady Audley," answered Robert, with a cold sternness that was so strange to him as to transform him into another creature—a pitiless

embodiment of justice, a cruel instrument of retribution—"no, Lady Audley," he repeated, "I have told you that womanly prevarication will not help you; I tell you now that defiance will not serve you. I have dealt fairly with you, and have given you fair warning. I gave you indirect notice of your danger two months ago."

"What do you mean?" asked my lady, suddenly.

"You did not choose to take that warning, Lady Audley," pursued Robert, "and the time has come in which I must speak very plainly to you. Do you think the gifts which you have played against fortune are to hold you exempt from retribution? No, my lady, your youth and beauty, your grace and refinement, only make the horrible secret of your life more horrible. I tell you that the evidence against you wants only one link to be strong enough for your condemnation, and that link shall be added. Helen Talboys never returned to her father's house. When she deserted that poor old father, she went away from his humble shelter with the declared

intention of washing her hands of that old life. What do people generally do when they wish to begin a new existence—to start for a second time in the race of life, free from the encumbrances that had fettered their first journey? *They change their names,* Lady Audley. Helen Talboys deserted her infant son—she went away from Wildernsea with the predetermination of sinking her identity. She disappeared as Helen Talboys upon the 16th of August, 1854, and upon the 17th of that month she reappeared as Lucy Graham, the friendless girl who undertook a profitless duty in consideration of a home in which she was asked no questions."

"You are mad, Mr. Audley!" cried my lady. "You are mad, and my husband shall protect me from your insolence. What if this Helen Talboys ran away from her home upon one day, and I entered my employer's house upon the next, what does that prove?"

"By itself, very little," replied Robert Audley; "but with the help of other evidence—"

"What evidence?"

"The evidence of two labels, pasted one over the other, upon a box left by you in the possession of Mrs. Vincent, the upper label bearing the name of Miss Graham, the lower that of Mrs. George Talboys."

My lady was silent. Robert Audley could not see her face in the dusk, but he could see that her two small hands were clasped convulsively over her heart, and he knew that the shot had gone home to its mark.

"God help her, poor, wretched creature," he thought. "She knows now that she is lost. I wonder if the judges of the land feel as I do now, when they put on the black cap, and pass sentence of death upon some poor, shivering wretch who has never done them any wrong. Do they feel a heroic fervour of virtuous indignation, or do they suffer this dull anguish which gnaws my vitals as I talk to this helpless woman?"

He walked by my lady's side, silently, for some minutes. They had been pacing up and down the dim avenue, and they were now drawing near the leafless shrubbery at one end of the lime-

walk—the shrubbery in which the ruined well sheltered its unheeded decay among the tangled masses of briery underwood.

A winding pathway, neglected and half-choked with weeds, led towards this well. Robert left the lime-walk, and struck into this pathway. There was more light in the shrubbery than in the avenue, and Mr. Audley wished to see my lady's face.

He did not speak until they reached the patch of rank grass beside the well. The massive brick-work had fallen away here and there, and loose fragments of masonry lay buried amidst weeds and briers. The heavy posts which had supported the wooden roller still remained, but the iron spindle had been dragged from its socket, and lay a few paces from the well, rusty, discoloured, and forgotten.

Robert Audley leant against one of the moss-grown posts and looked down at my lady's face, very pale in the chill winter twilight. The moon had newly risen, a feebly luminous crescent in the grey heavens, and a faint, ghostly light

mingled with the misty shadows of the declining day. My lady's face seemed like that face which Robert Audley had seen in his dreams looking out of the white foam flakes on the green sea waves and luring his uncle to destruction.

"Those two labels are in my possession, Lady Audley," he resumed. "I took them from the box left by you at Crescent Villas. I took them in the presence of Mrs. Vincent and Miss Tonks. Have you any proof to offer against this evidence? You say to me, 'I am Lucy Graham, and I have nothing whatever to do with Helen Talboys.' In that case, you can produce witnesses who will declare your antecedents. Where had you been living prior to your appearance at Crescent Villas? You must have friends, relations, connections, who can come forward to prove as much as this for you. If you were the most desolate creature upon this earth, you would be able to point to some one who could identify you with the past."

"Yes," cried my lady, "if I were placed in a criminal dock, I could, no doubt, bring forward

witnesses to refute your absurd accusation. But I am not in a criminal dock, Mr. Audley, and I do not choose to do anything but laugh at your ridiculous folly. I tell you that you are mad! If you please to say that Helen Talboys is not dead, and that I am Helen Talboys, you may do so. If you choose to go wandering about to the places in which I have lived, and to the places in which this Mrs. Talboys has lived, you must follow the bent of your own inclination; but I would warn you that such fancies have sometimes conducted people, as apparently sane as yourself, to the life-long imprisonment of a private lunatic asylum."

Robert Audley started, and recoiled a few paces among the weeds and brushwood as my lady said this.

"She would be capable of any new crime to shield her from the consequences of the old one." he thought. "She would be capable of using her influence with my uncle to place me in a madhouse."

I do not say that Robert Audley was a coward,

but I will admit that a shiver of horror, something akin to fear, chilled him to the heart, as he remembered the horrible things that have been done by women, since that day upon which Eve was created to be Adam's companion and help-meet in the garden of Eden. What if this woman's hellish power of dissimulation should be stronger than the truth, and crush him? She had not spared George Talboys when he had stood in her way, and menaced her with a certain peril; would she spare him who threatened her with a far greater danger? Are women merciful, or loving, or kind in proportion to their beauty and their grace? Was there not a certain Monsieur Mazers de Latude, who had the bad fortune to offend the all-accomplished Madame de Pompadour, who expiated his youthful indiscretion by a life-long imprisonment; who twice escaped from prison, to be twice cast back into captivity; who, trusting in the tardy generosity of his beautiful foe, betrayed himself to an implacable fiend? Robert Audley looked at the pale face of the woman standing by his side: that fair and beau-

tiful face, illumined by starry blue eyes, that had a strange and surely a dangerous light in them; and remembering a hundred stories of womanly perfidy, shuddered as he thought how unequal the struggle might be between himself and his uncle's wife.

"I have shown her my cards," he thought, "but she has kept hers hidden from me. The mask that she wears is not to be plucked away. My uncle would rather think me mad than believe her guilty."

The pale face of Clara Talboys—that grave and earnest face, so different in its character to my lady's fragile beauty—arose before him.

"What a coward I am to think of myself or my own danger," he thought. "The more I see of this woman, the more reason I have to dread her influence upon others; the more reason to wish her far away from this house."

He looked about him in the dusky obscurity. The lonely garden was as quiet as some solitary graveyard, walled in and hidden away from the world of the living.

"It was somewhere in this garden that she met George Talboys upon the day of his disappearance," he thought. "I wonder where it was they met; I wonder where it was that he looked into her cruel face, and taxed her with her falsehood."

My lady, with her little hand resting lightly upon the opposite post to that against which Robert leant, toyed with her pretty foot amongst the long weeds, but kept a furtive watch upon her enemy's face.

"It is to be a duel to the death, then, my lady," said Robert Audley, solemnly. "You refuse to accept my warning. You refuse to run away and repent of your wickedness in some foreign place, far from the generous gentleman you have deceived and fooled by your false witcheries. You choose to remain here and defy me."

"I do," answered Lady Audley, lifting her head, and looking full at the young barrister. "It is no fault of mine if my husband's nephew goes mad, and chooses me for the victim of his monomania."

"So be it, then, my lady," answered Robert. "My friend George Talboys was last seen entering these gardens by the little iron gate at which we came in to-night. He was last heard inquiring for you. He was seen to enter these gardens, but he was never seen to leave them. I do not believe that he ever did leave them. I believe that he met with his death within the boundary of these grounds; and that his body lies hidden below some quiet water, or in some forgotten corner of this place. I will have such a search made as shall level that house to the earth, and root up every tree in these gardens, rather than I will fail in finding the grave of my murdered friend."

Lucy Audley uttered a long, low, wailing cry, and threw up her arms above her head with a wild gesture of despair, but she made no answer to the ghastly charge of her accuser. Her arms slowly dropped, and she stood staring at Robert Audley, her white face gleaming through the dusk, her blue eyes glittering and dilated.

"You shall never live to do this," she said. "I

will kill you first. Why have you tormented me so? Why could you not let me alone? What harm had I ever done *you* that you should make yourself my persecutor, and dog my steps, and watch my looks, and play the spy upon me? Do you want to drive me mad? Do you know what it is to wrestle with a madwoman? No," cried my lady, with a laugh, "you do not, or you would never——"

She stopped abruptly, and drew herself suddenly to her fullest height. It was the same action which Robert had seen in the old half-drunken lieutenant; and it had that same dignity — the sublimity of extreme misery.

"Go away, Mr. Audley," she said. "You are mad, I tell you; you are mad."

"I am going, my lady," answered Robert, quietly. "I would have condoned your crimes out of pity to your wretchedness. You have refused to accept my mercy. I wished to have pity upon the living. I shall henceforth only remember my duty to the dead."

He walked away from the lonely well under the

shadow of the limes. My lady followed him slowly down that long, gloomy avenue, and across the rustic bridge to the iron gate. As he passed through the gate, Alicia came out of a little half-glass door that opened from an oak-panelled breakfast-room at one angle of the house, and met her cousin upon the threshold of the gateway.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Robert," she said. "Papa has come down to the library, and I'm sure he will be glad to see you."

The young man started at the sound of his cousin's fresh young voice. "Good heavens!" he thought, "can these two women be of the same clay? Can this frank, generous-hearted girl, who cannot conceal any impulse of her innocent nature, be of the same flesh and blood as that wretched creature whose shadow falls upon the path beside me?"

He looked from his cousin to Lady Audley, who stood near the gateway, waiting for him to stand aside and let her pass him.

"I don't know what has come to your cousin, my dear Alicia," said my lady. "He is so absent-

minded and eccentric, as to be quite beyond my comprehension."

"Indeed," exclaimed Miss Audley; "and yet I should imagine, from the length of your *tête-à-tête*, that you had made some effort to understand him."

"Oh, yes," said Robert, quietly, "my lady and I understand each other very well; but as it is growing late I will wish you good evening, ladies. I shall sleep to-night at Mount Stanning, as I have some business to attend to up there, and I will come down and see my uncle to-morrow."

"What, Robert!" cried Alicia, "you surely won't go away without seeing papa?"

"Yes, my dear," answered the young man. "I am a little disturbed by some disagreeable business in which I am very much concerned, and I would rather not see my uncle. Good night, Alicia. I will come or write to-morrow."

He pressed his cousin's hand, bowed to Lady Audley, and walked away under the black shadows of the archway, and out into the quiet avenue beyond the Court.

My lady and Alicia stood watching him until he was out of sight.

"What in goodness' name is the matter with my cousin Robert?" exclaimed Miss Audley, impatiently, as the barrister disappeared. "What does he mean by these absurd goings-on? Some disagreeable business that disturbs him, indeed! I suppose the unhappy creature has had a brief forced upon him by some evil-starred attorney, and is sinking into a state of imbecility from a dim consciousness of his own incompetence."

"Have you ever studied your cousin's character, Alicia?" asked my lady, very seriously, after a pause.

"Studied his character! No, Lady Audley. Why should I study his character?" said Alicia. "There is very little study required to convince anybody that he is a lazy, selfish Sybarite, who cares for nothing in the world except his own ease and comfort."

"But have you never thought him eccentric?"

"Eccentric!" repeated Alicia, pursing up her red lips and shrugging her shoulders. "Well,

yes—I believe that is the excuse generally made for such people. I suppose Bob *is* eccentric."

"I have never heard you speak of his father and mother," said my lady, thoughtfully. "Do you remember them?"

"I never saw his mother. She was a Miss Dalrymple, a very dashing girl, who ran away with my uncle, and lost a very handsome fortune in consequence. She died at Nice when poor Bob was five years old."

"Did you ever hear anything particular about her?"

"How do you mean, 'particular'?" asked Alicia.

"Did you ever hear that she was eccentric—what people call 'odd'?"

"Oh, no," said Alicia, laughing. "My aunt was a very reasonable woman, I believe, though she did marry for love. But you must remember that she died before I was born, and I have not, therefore, felt very much curiosity about her."

"But you recollect your uncle, I suppose?"

"My uncle Robert?" said Alicia. "Oh, yes, I remember him very well indeed."

"Was *he* eccentric—I mean to say, peculiar in his habits, like your cousin?"

"Yes, I believe Robert inherits all his absurdities from his father. My uncle expressed the same indifference for his fellow-creatures as my cousin; but as he was a good husband, an affectionate father, and a kind master, nobody ever challenged his opinions."

"But he *was* eccentric?"

"Yes; I suppose he was generally thought a little eccentric."

"Ah," said my lady gravely, "I thought as much. Do you know, Alicia, that madness is more often transmitted from father to son than from father to daughter, and from mother to daughter than from mother to son? Your cousin Robert Audley is a very handsome young man, and I believe a very good-hearted young man; but he must be watched, Alicia, for he is *mad!*"

"Mad!" cried Miss Audley, indignantly; "you are dreaming, my lady, or—or—you are

trying to frighten me," added the young lady, with considerable alarm.

"I only wish to put you on your guard, Alicia," answered my lady. "Mr. Audley may be as you say, merely eccentric; but he has talked to me this evening in a manner that has filled me with absolute terror, and I believe that he is going mad. I shall speak very seriously to Sir Michael this very night."

"Speak to papa!" exclaimed Alicia; "you surely won't distress papa by suggesting such a possibility!"

"I shall only put him on his guard, my dear Alicia."

"But he'll never believe you," said Miss Audley; "he will laugh at such an idea."

"No, Alicia; he will believe anything that I tell him," answered my lady, with a quiet smile.

CHAPTER XII.

PREPARING THE GROUND.

LADY AUDLEY went from the garden to the library, a pleasant oak-panelled homely apartment in which Sir Michael liked to sit reading or writing, or arranging the business of his estate with his steward, a stalwart countryman, half agriculturist, half lawyer, who rented a small farm a few miles from the Court.

The baronet was seated in a capacious easy-chair near the hearth. The bright blaze of the fire rose and fell, flashing now upon the polished prominences of the black-oak bookcase, now upon the gold and scarlet bindings of the books; sometimes glimmering upon the Athenian helmet of a marble Pallas, sometimes lighting up the forehead of Sir Robert Peel.

The lamp upon the reading-table had not yet

been lighted, and Sir Michael sat in the firelight waiting for the coming of his young wife.

It is impossible for me ever to tell the purity of his generous love—it is impossible to describe that affection which was as tender as the love of a young mother for her first-born, as brave and chivalrous as the heroic passion of a Bayard for his liege mistress.

The door opened while he was thinking of this fondly-loved wife, and looking up, the baronet saw the slender form standing in the doorway.

"Why, my darling!" he exclaimed, as my lady closed the door behind her, and came towards his chair, "I have been thinking of you, and waiting for you for an hour. Where have you been, and what have you been doing?"

My lady, standing in the shadow rather than in the light, paused a few moments before replying to this question.

"I have been to Chelmsford," she said, "shopping; and—"

She hesitated—twisting her bonnet-strings in

her thin white fingers with an air of pretty embarrassment.

"And what, my dear," asked the baronet—"what have you been doing since you came from Chelmsford? I heard a carriage stop at the door an hour ago. It was yours, was it not?"

"Yes, I came home an hour ago," answered my lady, with the same air of embarrassment.

"And what have you been doing since you came home?"

Sir Michael Audley asked this question with a slightly reproachful accent. His young wife's presence made the sunshine of his life, and though he could not bear to chain her to his side, it grieved him to think that she could willingly remain unnecessarily absent from him frittering away her time in some childish talk or frivolous occupation.

"What have you been doing since you came home, my dear?" he repeated. "What has kept you so long away from me?"

"I have been talking — to — Mr. Robert Audley."

She still twisted her bonnet-string round and round her fingers. She still spoke with the same air of embarrassment.

"Robert!" exclaimed the baronet; "is Robert here?"

"He was here a little while ago."

"And is here still, I suppose?"

"No, he has gone away."

"Gone away!" cried Sir Michael. "What do you mean, my darling."

"I mean that your nephew came to the Court this afternoon. Alicia and I found him idling about the gardens. He stayed here till about a quarter of an hour ago talking to me, and then he hurried off, without a word of explanation, except, indeed, some ridiculous excuse about business at Mount Stanning."

"Business at Mount Stanning! Why, what business can he possibly have in that out-of-the-way place? He has gone to sleep at Mount Stanning, then, I suppose?"

"Yes, I think he said something to that effect."

"Upon my word," exclaimed the baronet, "I think that boy is half mad."

My lady's face was so much in shadow, that Sir Michael Audley was unaware of the bright change that came over its sickly pallor as he made this very common-place observation. A triumphant smile illumined Lucy Audley's countenance, a smile that plainly said, "It is coming—it is coming; I can twist him which way I like. I can put black before him, and if I say it is white, he will believe me."

But Sir Michael Audley, in declaring that his nephew's wits were disordered, merely uttered that common-place ejaculation which is well known to have very little meaning. The baronet had, it is true, no very great estimate of Robert's faculty for the business of this every-day life. He was in the habit of looking upon his nephew as a good-natured nonentity—a man whose heart had been amply stocked by liberal nature with all the best things the generous goddess had to bestow, but whose brain had been somewhat overlooked in the distribution of

intellectual gifts. Sir Michael Audley made that mistake which is very commonly made by easy-going, well-to-do observers, who have no occasion to look below the surface. He mistook laziness for incapacity. He thought because his nephew was idle, he must necessarily be stupid. He concluded that if Robert did not distinguish himself it was because he could not.

He forgot the mute inglorious Miltons who die voiceless and inarticulate for want of that dogged perseverance, that blind courage, which the poet must possess before he can find a publisher; he forgot the Cromwells, who see the noble vessel—political economy—floundering upon a sea of confusion, and going down in a tempest of noisy bewilderment, and who yet are powerless to get at the helm, forbidden even to send out a life-boat to the sinking ship. Surely it is a mistake to judge of what a man can do by that which he has done.

The world's Valhalla is a close borough, and perhaps the greatest men may be those who perish silently far away from the sacred portal. Perhaps the purest and brightest spirits are those who

shrink from the turmoil of the race-course—the tumult and confusion of the struggle. The game of life is something like the game of *écarté*, and it may be that the best cards are sometimes left in the pack.

My lady threw off her bonnet, and seated herself upon a velvet-covered footstool at Sir Michael's feet. There was nothing studied or affected in this girlish action. It was so natural to Lucy Audley to be childish, that no one would have wished to see her otherwise. It would have seemed as foolish to expect dignified reserve or womanly gravity from this amber-haired syren, as to wish for rich basses in the clear treble of a skylark's song.

She sat with her pale face turned away from the firelight, and with her hands locked together upon the arm of her husband's easy-chair. They were very restless, these slender white hands. My lady twisted the jewelled fingers in and out of each other, as she talked to her husband.

"I wanted to come to you, you know, dear," she said—"I wanted to come to you directly I

got home, but Mr. Audley insisted upon my stopping to talk to him."

"But what about, my love?" asked the baronet, "What could Robert have to say to you?"

My lady did not answer this question. Her fair head drooped upon her husband's knee, her rippling yellow curls fell over her face.

Sir Michael lifted that beautiful head with his strong hands, and raised my lady's face. The firelight shining on that pale face lit up the large, soft blue eyes which were drowned in tears.

"Lucy, Lucy!" cried the baronet, "what is the meaning of this? My love, my love, what has happened to distress you in this manner?"

Lady Audley tried to speak, but the words died away inarticulately upon her trembling lips. A choking sensation in her throat seemed to strangle those false and plausible words, her only armour against her enemies. She could not speak. The agony she had endured silently in the dismal lime-walk had grown too strong for her, and she broke into a tempest of hysterical sobbing. It was no simulated grief that shook

her slender frame, and tore at her like some ravenous beast that would have rent her piecemeal with its horrible strength. It was a storm of real anguish and terror, of remorse and misery. It was the one wild outcry, in which the woman's feebler nature got the better of the syren's art.

It was not thus that she had meant to fight her terrible duel with Robert Audley. These were not the weapons which she had intended to use; but perhaps no artifice which she could have devised would have served her so well as this one outburst of natural grief. It shook her husband to the very soul. It bewildered and terrified him. It reduced the strong intellect of the man to helpless confusion and perplexity. It struck at the one weak point in a good man's nature. It appealed straight to Sir Michael Audley's affection for his wife.

Ah, Heaven help a strong man's tender weakness for the woman he loves. Heaven pity him when the guilty creature has deceived him and comes with her tears and lamentations to throw herself at his feet in self-abandonment and

remorse, torturing him with the sight of her agony, rending *his* heart with her sobs, lacerating *his* breast with her groans. Multiplying her own sufferings into a great anguish for him to bear, multiplying them by twenty-fold, multiplying them in the ratio of a brave man's capacity for endurance. Heaven forgive him if, maddened by that cruel agony, the balance wavers for a moment, and he is ready to forgive *anything*, ready to take this wretched one to the shelter of his breast, and to pardon that which the stern voice of manly honour urges must not be pardoned. Pity him, pity him. The wife's worst remorse when she stands without the threshold of the home she may never enter more is not equal to the agony of the husband who closes the portal on that familiar and entreating face. The anguish of the mother who may never look again upon her children is less than the torment of the father who has to say to those children, "My little ones, you are henceforth motherless."

Sir Michael Audley rose from his chair, trembling with indignation, and ready to do immediate

battle with the person who had caused his wife's grief.

"Lucy," he said, "Lucy, I insist upon your telling me what and who has distressed you. I insist upon it. Whoever has annoyed you shall answer to me for your grief. Come, my love, tell me directly what it is?"

He reseated himself and bent over the drooping figure at his feet, calming his own agitation in his desire to soothe his wife's distress.

"Tell me what it is, my dear?" he whispered, tenderly.

The sharp paroxysm had passed away, and my lady looked up: a glittering light shone through the tears in her eyes, and the lines about her pretty rosy mouth, those hard and cruel lines which Robert Audley had observed in the pre-Raphaelite portrait, were plainly visible in the firelight.

"I am very silly," she said; "but really he has made me quite hysterical."

"Who—who has made you hysterical?"

"Your nephew—Mr. Robert Audley."

"Robert!" cried the baronet. "Lucy, what do you mean?"

"I told you that Mr. Audley insisted upon my going into the lime-walk, dear," said my lady. "He wanted to talk to me, he said, and I went, and he said such horrible things that—"

"What horrible things, Lucy?"

Lady Audley shuddered and clung with convulsive fingers to the strong hand that had rested caressingly upon her shoulder.

"What did he say, Lucy?"

"Oh, my dear love, how can I tell you?" cried my lady. "I know that I shall distress you—or you will laugh at me, and then—"

"Laugh at you? no, Lucy."

Lady Audley was silent for a moment. She sat looking straight before her into the fire, with her fingers still locked about her husband's hand.

"My dear," she said, slowly, hesitating now and then between her words, as if she almost shrank from uttering them, "have you ever—I am so afraid of vexing you—or—have you ever thought Mr. Audley a little—a little—"

"A little what, my darling?"

"A little out of his mind," faltered Lady Audley.

"Out of his mind!" cried Sir Michael. "My dear girl, what are you thinking of?"

"You said just now, dear, that you thought he was half mad."

"Did I, my love?" said the baronet, laughing. "I don't remember saying it, and it was a mere *façon de parler*, that meant nothing whatever. Robert may be a little eccentric—a little stupid, perhaps—he mayn't be overburdened with wits, but I don't think he has brains enough for madness. I believe it's generally your great intellects that get out of order."

"But madness is sometimes hereditary," said my lady. "Mr. Audley may have inherited—"

"He has inherited no madness from his father's family," interrupted Sir Michael. "The Audleys have never peopled private lunatic asylums or fee'd mad doctors."

"Nor from his mother's family?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"People generally keep these things a secret,"

said my lady, gravely. "There may have been madness in your sister-in-law's family."

"I don't think so, my dear," replied Sir Michael. "But, Lucy, tell me what, in Heaven's name, has put this idea into your head?"

"I have been trying to account for your nephew's conduct. I can account for it in no other manner. If you had heard the things he said to me to-night, Sir Michael, you too might have thought him mad."

"But what did he say, Lucy?"

"I can scarcely tell you. You can see how much he has stupefied and bewildered me. I believe he has lived too long alone in those solitary Temple chambers. Perhaps he reads too much, or smokes too much. You know that some physicians declare madness to be a mere illness of the brain—an illness to which any one is subject, and which may be produced by given causes, and cured by given means."

Lady Audley's eyes were still fixed upon the burning coals in the wide grate. She spoke as if she had been discussing a subject that she

had often heard discussed before. She spoke as if her mind had almost wandered away from the thought of her husband's nephew to the wider question of madness in the abstract.

"Why should he not be mad?" resumed my lady. "People are insane for years and years before their insanity is found out. *They* know that they are mad, but they know how to keep their secret; and, perhaps they may sometimes keep it till they die. Sometimes a paroxysm seizes them, and in an evil hour they betray themselves. They commit a crime, perhaps. The horrible temptation of opportunity assails them, the knife is in their hand, and the unconscious victim by their side. They may conquer the restless demon and go away, and die innocent of any violent deed; but they may yield to the horrible temptation—the frightful, passionate, hungry craving for violence and horror. They sometimes yield, and are lost."

Lady Audley's voice rose as she argued this dreadful question. The hysterical excitement from which she had only just recovered had left

its effects upon her, but she controlled herself, and her tone grew calmer as she resumed:—

"Robert Audley is mad," she said, decisively. "What is one of the strongest diagnostics of madness—what is the first appalling sign of mental aberration? The mind becomes stationary; the brain stagnates; the even current of the mind is interrupted; the thinking power of the brain resolves itself into a monotone. As the waters of a tideless pool putrefy by reason of their stagnation, the mind becomes turbid and corrupt through lack of action; and perpetual reflection upon one subject resolves itself into monomania. Robert Audley is a monomaniac. The disappearance of his friend, George Talboys, grieved and bewildered him. He dwelt upon this one idea until he lost the power of thinking of anything else. The one idea looked at perpetually became distorted to his mental vision. Repeat the commonest word in the English language twenty times, and before the twentieth repetition you will have begun to wonder whether the word which you repeat is really the word you

mean to utter. Robert Audley has thought of his friend's disappearance until the one idea has done its fatal and unhealthy work. He looks at a common event with a vision that is diseased, and he distorts it into a gloomy horror engendered of his own monomania. If you do not want to make me as mad as he is, you must never let me see him again. He declared to-night that George Talboys was murdered in this place, and that he will root up every tree in the gardens, and pull down every brick in the house, in his search for—"

My lady paused. The words died away upon her lips. She had exhausted herself by the strange energy with which she had spoken. She had been transformed from a frivolous childish beauty into a woman, strong to argue her own cause and plead her own defence.

"Pull down this house!" cried the baronet. "George Talboys murdered at Audley Court! Did Robert say this, Lucy?"

"He said something of that kind—something that frightened me very much."

"Then he must be mad," said Sir Michael, gravely. "I'm bewildered by what you tell me. Did he really say this, Lucy, or did you misunderstand him?"

"I—I—don't think I did," faltered my lady. "You saw how frightened I was when I first came in. I should not have been so much agitated if he hadn't said something horrible."

Lady Audley had availed herself of the very strongest argument by which she could help her cause.

"To be sure, my darling, to be sure," answered the baronet. "What could have put such a horrible fancy into the unhappy boy's head? This Mr. Talboys—a perfect stranger to all of us—murdered, at Audley Court! I'll go to Mount Stanning to-night, and see Robert. I have known him ever since he was a baby, and I cannot be deceived in him. If there is really anything wrong, he will not be able to conceal it from me."

My lady shrugged her shoulders.

"That is rather an open question," she said.

"It is generally a stranger who is the first to observe any psychological peculiarity."

The big words sounded strange from my lady's rosy lips; but her newly-adopted wisdom had a certain quaint prettiness about it, which bewildered her husband.

"But you must not go to Mount Stanning, my dear darling," she said, tenderly. "Remember that you are under strict orders to stay in-doors until the weather is milder, and the sun shines upon this cruel ice-bound country."

Sir Michael Audley sank back in his capacious chair with a sigh of resignation.

"That's true, Lucy," he said; "we must obey Mr. Dawson. I suppose Robert will come to see me to-morrow."

"Yes, dear. I think he said he would."

"Then we must wait till to-morrow, my darling. I can't believe that there really is anything wrong with the poor boy—I can't believe it, Lucy."

"Then how do you account for his extraor-

dinary delusion about this Mr. Talboys?" asked my lady.

Sir Michael shook his head.

"I don't know, Lucy—I don't know," he answered. "It is always so difficult to believe that any one of the calamities that continually befal our fellow-men will ever happen to us. I can't believe that my nephew's mind is impaired —I can't believe it. I—I'll get him to stop here, Lucy, and I'll watch him closely. I tell you, my love, if there is anything wrong I am sure to find it out. I can't be mistaken in a young man who has always been the same to me as my own son. But, my darling, why were you so frightened by Robert's wild talk? It could not affect you."

My lady sighed piteously.

"You must think me very strong-minded, Sir Michael," she said, with rather an injured air, "if you imagine I can hear of these sort of things indifferently. I know I shall never be able to see Mr. Audley again."

"And you shall not, my dear—you shall not."

"You said just now you would have him here," murmured Lady Audley.

"But I will not, my darling girl, if his presence annoys you. Good heavens, Lucy, can you imagine for a moment that I have any higher wish than to promote your happiness? I will consult some London physician about Robert, and let him discover if there is really anything the matter with my poor brother's only son. *You* shall not be annoyed, Lucy."

"You must think me very unkind, dear," said my lady, "and I know I *ought* not to be annoyed by the poor fellow; but he really seems to have taken some absurd notion into his head about me."

"About *you*, Lucy!" cried Sir Michael.

"Yes, dear. He seems to connect me in some vague manner—which I cannot quite understand—with the disappearance of this Mr. Talboys."

"Impossible, Lucy. You must have misunderstood him."

"I don't think so."

"Then he must be mad," said the baronet—

"he must be mad. I will wait till he goes back to town, and then send some one to his chambers to talk to him. Good heavens, what a mysterious business this is!"

"I fear I have distressed you, darling," murmured Lady Audley.

"Yes, my dear, I am very much distressed by what you have told me; but you were quite right to talk to me frankly about this dreadful business. I must think it over, dearest, and try and decide what is best to be done."

My lady rose from the low ottoman on which she had been seated. The fire had burned down, and there was only a faint glow of red light in the room. Lucy Audley bent over her husband's chair, and put her lips to his broad forehead.

"How good you have always been to me, dear," she whispered softly. "You would never let any one influence you against me, would you, my darling?"

"Influence me against you?" repeated the baronet. "No, my love."

"Because you know, dear," pursued my lady,

"there are wicked people as well as mad people in the world, and there may be some persons to whose interest it would be to injure me."

"They had better not try it then, my dear," answered Sir Michael; "they would find themselves in rather a dangerous position if they did."

Lady Audley laughed aloud, with a gay, triumphant, silvery peal of laughter that vibrated through the quiet room.

"My own dear darling," she said, "I know you love me. And now I must run away, dear, for it's past seven o'clock. I was engaged to dine at Mrs. Montford's, but I must send a groom with a message of apology, for Mr. Audley has made me quite unfit for company. I shall stay at home, and nurse you, dear. You'll go to bed very early, won't you, and take great care of yourself?"

"Yes, dear."

My lady tripped out of the room to give her orders about the message which was to be carried to the house at which she was to have dined. She paused for a moment as she closed the library

door—she paused, and laid her hand upon her breast to check the rapid throbbing of her heart.

"I have been afraid of you, Mr. Robert Audley," she thought, "but perhaps the time may come in which you will have cause to be afraid of me."

CHAPTER XIII.

PHŒBE'S PETITION.

THE division between Lady Audley and her step-daughter had not become any narrower in the two months which had elapsed since the pleasant Christmas holiday time had been kept at Audley Court. There was no open warfare between the two women; there was only an armed neutrality, broken every now and then by brief feminine skirmishes and transient wordy tempests. I am sorry to say that Alicia would very much have preferred a hearty pitched battle to this silent and undemonstrative disunion; but it was not very easy to quarrel with my lady. She had soft answers for the turning away of wrath. She could smile bewitchingly at her step-daughter's open petulance, and laugh merrily at the young lady's ill-temper. Perhaps had she been less amiable, had she been indeed more like Alicia in

disposition, the two ladies might have expended their enmity in one tremendous quarrel, and might ever afterwards have been affectionate and friendly. But Lucy Audley would not make war. She carried forward the sum of her dislike, and put it out at a steady rate of interest, until the breach between her step-daughter and herself widening a little every day, became a great gulf utterly impassable by olive-branch-bearing doves, from either side of the abyss. There can be no reconciliation where there is no open warfare. There must be a battle, a brave boisterous battle, with pennants waving and cannon roaring, before there can be peaceful treaties and enthusiastic shaking of hands. Perhaps the union between France and England owes its greatest force to the recollection of bygone conquest and defeat. We have hated each other and licked each other and *had it out,* as the common phrase goes, and we can afford now to fall into each other's arms and vow eternal friendship and everlasting brotherhood. Let us hope that when Northern Yankeydom has decimated and been decimated,

blustering Jonathan may fling himself upon his southern brother's breast, forgiving and forgiven.

Alicia Audley and her father's pretty wife had plenty of room for the comfortable indulgence of their dislike in the spacious old mansion. My lady had her own apartments, as we know—luxurious chambers, in which all conceivable elegancies had been gathered for the comfort of their occupant. Alicia had her own rooms in another part of the large house. She had her favourite mare, her Newfoundland dog, and her drawing materials, and she made herself tolerably happy. She was not very happy, this frank, generous-hearted girl, for it was scarcely possible that she could be altogether at ease in the constrained atmosphere of the Court. Her father was changed—that dear father, over whom she had once reigned supreme with the boundless authority of a spoiled child, had accepted another ruler and submitted to a new dynasty. Little by little my lady's pretty power made itself felt in that narrow household, and Alicia saw her father

gradually lured across the gulf that divided Lady Audley from her step-daughter, until he stood at last quite upon the other side of the abyss, and looked coldly upon his only child across that widening chasm.

Alicia felt that he was lost to her. My lady's beaming smiles, my lady's winning words, my lady's radiant glances and bewitching graces had done their work of enchantment, and Sir Michael had grown to look upon his daughter as a somewhat wilful and capricious young person who had behaved with determined unkindness to the wife he loved.

Poor Alicia saw all this, and bore her burden as well as she could. It seemed very hard to be a handsome grey-eyed heiress, with dogs and horses and servants at her command, and yet to be so much alone in the world as to know of not one friendly ear into which she might pour her sorrows.

"If Bob was good for anything, I could have told him how unhappy I am," thought Miss Audley; "but I may just as well tell Cæsar my

troubles, for any consolation I should get from my cousin Robert."

Sir Michael Audley obeyed his pretty nurse, and went to bed at a little after nine o'clock upon this bleak March evening. Perhaps the baronet's bedroom was about the pleasantest retreat that an invalid could have chosen in such cold and cheerless weather. The dark-green velvet curtains were drawn before the windows and about the ponderous bed. The wood fire burned redly upon the broad hearth. The reading-lamp was lighted upon a delicious little table close to Sir Michael's pillow, and a heap of magazines and newspapers had been arranged by my lady's own fair hands for the pleasure of the invalid.

Lady Audley sat by the bedside for about ten minutes talking to her husband, talking very seriously, about this strange and awful question—Robert Audley's lunacy; but at the end of that time she rose and bade him good-night. She lowered the green silk shade before the reading-lamp, adjusting it carefully for the repose of the baronet's eyes.

"I shall leave you, dear," she said. "If you can sleep, so much the better. If you wish to read, the books and papers are close to you. I will leave the doors between the rooms open, and I shall hear your voice if you call me."

Lady Audley went through her dressing-room into the boudoir, where she had sat with her husband since dinner.

Every evidence of womanly refinement was visible in the elegant chamber. My lady's piano was open, covered with scattered sheets of music and exquisitely-bound collections of scenas and fantasias which no master need have disdained to study. My lady's easel stood near the window, bearing witness to my lady's artistic talent, in the shape of a water-coloured sketch of the Court and gardens. My lady's fairy-like embroideries of lace and muslin, rainbow-hued silks, and delicately-tinted wools littered the luxurious apartment; while the looking-glasses, cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners by an artistic upholsterer, multiplied my lady's image, and in that

image reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber.

Amid all this lamplight, gilding, colour, wealth, and beauty, Lucy Audley sat down on a low seat by the fire to think.

If Mr. Holman Hunt could have peeped into the pretty boudoir, I think the picture would have been photographed upon his brain to be reproduced by and bye upon a bishop's half-length for the glorification of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. My lady in that half-recumbent attitude, with her elbow resting on one knee, and her perfect chin supported by her hand, the rich folds of drapery falling away in long undulating lines from the exquisite outline of her figure, and the luminous rose-coloured fire-light enveloping her in a soft haze, only broken by the golden glitter of her yellow hair. Beautiful in herself, but made bewilderingly beautiful by the gorgeous surroundings which adorn the shrine of her loveliness. Drinking-cups of gold and ivory, chiselled by Benvenuto Cellini; cabinets of buhl and porcelain, bearing the cipher of Austrian Marie Antoinette, amid devices of rose-

buds and true-lover's knots, birds and butterflies, cupidons and shepherdesses, goddesses, courtiers, cottagers and milkmaids; statuettes of Parian marble and biscuit china; gilded baskets of hot-house flowers; fantastical caskets of Indian filagree work; fragile tea-cups of turquoise china, adorned by medallion miniatures of Louis the Great and Louis the Well-beloved, Louise de la Vallière, and Jeanne Marie du Barry; cabinet pictures and gilded mirrors, shimmering satin and diaphonous lace; all that gold can buy or art devise had been gathered together for the beautification of this quiet chamber in which my lady sat listening to the moaning of the shrill March wind and the flapping of the ivy leaves against the casements, and looking into the red chasms in the burning coals.

I should be preaching a very stale sermon, and harping upon a very familiar moral, if I were to seize this opportunity of declaiming against art and beauty, because my lady was more wretched in this elegant apartment than many a half-starved sempstress in her dreary garret. She was

wretched by reason of a wound which lay too deep for the possibility of any solace from such plasters as wealth and luxury; but her wretchedness was of an abnormal nature, and I can see no occasion for seizing upon the fact of her misery as an argument in favour of poverty and discomfort as opposed to opulence. The Benvenuto Cellini carvings and the Sèvres porcelain could not give her happiness because she had passed out of their region. She was no longer innocent, and the pleasure we take in art and loveliness being an innocent pleasure had passed beyond her reach. Six or seven years before, she would have been happy in the possession of this little Aladdin's palace; but she had wandered out of the circle of careless pleasure-seeking creatures, she had strayed far away into a desolate labyrinth of guilt and treachery, terror and crime, and all the treasures that had been collected for her could have given her no pleasure but one, the pleasure of flinging them into a heap beneath her feet, and trampling upon them and destroying them in her cruel despair.

There were some things that would have inspired her with an awful joy, a horrible rejoicing. If Robert Audley, her pitiless enemy, her unrelenting pursuer, had lain dead in the adjoining chamber, she would have exulted over his bier.

What pleasures could have remained for Lucretia Borgia and Catherine de' Medici, when the dreadful boundary line between innocence and guilt was passed, and the lost creatures stood upon the lonely outer side? Only horrible vengeful joys, and treacherous delights were left for these miserable women. With what disdainful bitterness they must have watched the frivolous vanities, the petty deceptions, the paltry sins of ordinary offenders. Perhaps they took a horrible pride in the enormity of their wickedness; in this "divinity of Hell," which made them greatest amongst sinful creatures.

My lady, brooding by the fire in her lonely chamber, with her large, clear blue eyes fixed upon the yawning gulfs of lurid crimson in the burning coals, may have thought of many things very far away from the terribly silent struggle in

which she was engaged. She may have thought of long-ago years of childish innocence, childish follies and selfishnesses, or frivolous feminine sins that had weighed very lightly upon her conscience. Perhaps in that retrospective reverie she recalled the early time in which she had first looked in the glass and discovered that she was beautiful: that fatal early time in which she had first begun to look upon her loveliness as a right divine, a boundless possession which was to be a set-off against all girlish short-comings, a counter-balance of every youthful sin. Did she remember the day in which that fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical, with that petty woman's tyranny which is the worst of despotisms? Did she trace every sin of her life back to its true source? and did she discover that poisoned fountain in her own exaggerated estimate of the value of a pretty face? Surely, if her thoughts wandered so far along the backward current of her life, she must have

repented in bitterness and despair of that first day in which the master-passions of her life had become her rulers, and the three demons of Vanity, Selfishness and Ambition had joined hands and said, "This woman is our slave; let us see what she will become under our guidance."

How small these first youthful errors seemed as my lady looked back upon them in that long reverie by the lonely hearth! What small vanities, what petty cruelties! A triumph over a schoolfellow, a flirtation with the lover of a friend, an assertion of the right divine invested in blue eyes and shimmering golden-tinted hair. But how terribly that narrow path-way had widened out into the broad high-road of sin, and how swift the footsteps had become upon the now familiar way!

My lady twined her fingers in her loose amber curls, and made as if she would have torn them from her head. But even in that moment of mute despair the unyielding dominion of beauty asserted itself, and she released the poor tangled glitter of

ringlets, leaving them to make a halo round her head in the dim firelight.

"I was not wicked when I was young," she thought, as she stared gloomily at the fire, "I was only thoughtless. I never did any harm—at least, never wilfully. Have I ever been really *wicked,* I wonder?" she mused. "My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply laid plots. I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging every circumstance of an appointed crime. I wonder whether they suffered—those women—whether they ever suffered as—"

Her thoughts wandered away into a weary maze of confusion. Suddenly she drew herself up with a proud defiant gesture, and her eyes glittered with a light that was not entirely reflected from the fire.

"You are mad, Mr. Robert Audley," she said, "you are mad, and your fancies are a madman's fancies. I know what madness is. I know

its signs and tokens, and I say that you are mad."

She put her hand to her head, as if thinking of something which confused and bewildered her, and which she found it difficult to contemplate with calmness.

"Dare I defy him?" she muttered, "Dare I? dare I? Will he stop now that he has once gone so far? Will he stop for fear of me? Will he stop for fear of me when the thought of what his uncle must suffer has not stopped him? Will anything stop him—but death?"

She pronounced the last two words in an awful whisper, and with her head bent forward, her eyes dilated, and her lips still parted as they had been parted in her utterance of that final word "death," she sat blankly staring at the fire.

"I can't plot horrible things," she muttered presently; "my brain isn't strong enough, or I'm not wicked enough, or brave enough. If I met Robert Audley in those lonely gardens, as I—"

The current of her thoughts was interrupted by a cautious knocking at her door. She rose

suddenly, startled by any sound in the stillness of her room. She rose, and threw herself into a low chair near the fire. She flung her beautiful head back upon the soft cushions, and took a book from the table near her.

Insignificant as this action was it spoke very plainly. It spoke very plainly of ever-recurring fears—of fatal necessities for concealment—of a mind that in its silent agonies was ever alive to the importance of outward effect. It told more plainly than anything else could have told, how complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessity of her life.

The modest rap at the boudoir-door was repeated.

"Come in," cried Lady Audley, in her liveliest tone.

The door was opened with that respectful noiselessness peculiar to a well-bred servant, and a young woman plainly dressed, and carrying some of the cold March winds in the folds of her garments, crossed the threshold of the apartment and lingered near the door, waiting per-

mission to approach the inner regions of my lady's retreat.

It was Phœbe Marks, the pale-faced wife of the Mount Stanning innkeeper.

"I beg pardon, my lady, for intruding without leave," she said; "but I thought I might venture to come straight up without waiting for permission."

"Yes, yes, Phœbe, to be sure. Take off your bonnet, you wretched cold-looking creature, and come and sit down here."

Lady Audley pointed to the low ottoman upon which she had herself been seated a few minutes before. The lady's-maid had often sat upon it listening to her mistress's prattle in the old days, when she had been my lady's chief companion and *confidante*.

"Sit down here, Phœbe," Lady Audley repeated; "sit down here, and talk to me. I'm very glad you came here to-night. I was horribly lonely in this dreary place."

My lady shivered, and looked round the luxurious chamber very much as if the Sèvres

and bronze, the buhl and ormolu, had been the mouldering adornments of some ruined castle. The dreary wretchedness of her thoughts had communicated itself to every object about her, and all outer things took their colour from that weary inner life which held its slow course of secret anguish in her breast. She had spoken the entire truth in saying that she was glad of her lady's-maid's visit. Her frivolous nature clung to this weak shelter in the hour of her fear and suffering. There were sympathies between her and this girl, who was like herself inwardly as well as outwardly—like herself, selfish, and cold, and cruel, eager for her own advancement, and greedy of opulence and elegance, angry with the lot that had been cast her, and weary of dull dependence. My lady hated Alicia for her frank, passionate, generous, daring nature; she hated her step-daughter, and clung to this pale-faced, pale-haired girl, whom she thought neither better nor worse than herself.

Phœbe Marks obeyed her late mistress's commands, and took off her bonnet before seating

herself on the ottoman at Lady Audley's feet. Her smooth bands of light hair were unruffled by the March winds; her trimly-made drab dress and linen collar were as neatly arranged as they could have been had she only that moment completed her toilet.

"Sir Michael is better, I hope, my lady?" she said.

"Yes, Phœbe, much better. He is asleep. You may close that door," added Lady Audley with a motion of her head towards the door of communication between the rooms, which had been left open.

Mrs. Marks obeyed submissively, and then returned to her seat.

"I am very, very unhappy, Phœbe," my lady said, fretfully; "wretchedly miserable."

"About the secret?" asked Mrs. Marks, in a half whisper.

My lady did not notice that question. She resumed in the same complaining tone. She was glad to be able to complain even to this lady's-maid. She had brooded over her fears, and had

suffered so long in secret, that it was an inexpressible relief to her to bemoan her fate aloud.

"I am cruelly persecuted and harassed, Phœbe Marks," she said. "I am pursued and tormented by a man whom I never injured, whom I have never wished to injure. I am never suffered to rest by this relentless tormentor, and I—"

She paused, staring at the fire again, as she had done in her loneliness. Lost again in the dark intricacies of thoughts which wandered hither and thither in a dreadful chaos of terrified bewilderment, she could not come to any fixed conclusion.

Phœbe Marks watched my lady's face, looking upward at her late mistress with pale, anxious eyes, that only relaxed their watchfulness when Lady Audley's glance met that of her companion.

"I think I know whom you mean, my lady," said the innkeeper's wife after a pause; "I think I know who it is who is so cruel to you."

"Oh, of course," answered my lady, bitterly; "my secrets are everybody's secrets. You know all about it, no doubt."

"The person is a gentleman, is he not, my lady?"

"Yes."

"A gentleman who came to the Castle Inn two months ago, when I warned you—"

"Yes, yes," answered my lady impatiently.

"I thought so. The same gentleman is at our place to-night, my lady."

Lady Audley started up from her chair—started up as if she would have done something desperate in her despairing fury; but she sank back again with a weary, querulous sigh. What warfare could such a feeble creature wage against her fate? What could she do but wind like a hunted hare till she found her way back to the starting-point of the cruel chace, to be there trampled down by her pursuers?

"At the Castle Inn?" she cried. "I might have known as much. He has gone there to wring my secrets from your husband. Fool!" she exclaimed, suddenly turning upon Phœbe Marks in a transport of anger, "do you want to destroy me that you have left those two men together?"

Mrs. Marks clasped her hands piteously.

"I didn't come away of my own free will, my lady," she said; "no one could have been more unwilling to leave the house than I was this night. I was sent here."

"Who sent you here?"

"Luke, my lady. You can't tell how hard he can be upon me if I go against him."

"Why did he send you?"

The innkeeper's wife dropped her eyelids under Lady Audley's angry glances, and hesitated confusedly before she answered this question.

"Indeed, my lady," she stammered, "I didn't want to come. I told Luke that it was too bad for us to worry you, first asking this favour, and then asking that, and never leaving you alone for a month together; but—but—he drove me down with his loud blustering talk, and he made me come."

"Yes, yes," cried Lady Audley, impatiently, "I know that. I want to know why you have come."

"Why, you know, my lady," answered Phœbe,

half reluctantly, "Luke is very extravagant; and all I can say to him, I can't get him to be careful or steady. He's not sober; and when he's drinking with a lot of rough countrymen, and drinking, perhaps, even more than they do, it isn't likely that his head can be very clear for accounts. If it hadn't been for me we should have been ruined before this; and hard as I've tried, I haven't been able to keep the ruin off. You remember giving me the money for the brewer's bill, my lady?"

"Yes, I remember very well," answered Lady Audley, with a bitter laugh, "for I wanted that money to pay my own bills."

"I know you did, my lady, and it was very, very hard for me to have to come and ask you for it, after all that we'd received from you before. But that isn't the worst; when Luke sent me down here to beg the favour of that help, he never told me that the Christmas rent was still owing: but it was, my lady, and it's owing now, and—and there's a bailiff in the house to-night, and we're to be sold up to-morrow unless—"

"Unless I pay your rent, I suppose," cried Lucy Audley. "I might have guessed what was coming."

"Indeed, indeed, my lady, I wouldn't have asked it," sobbed Phœbe Marks, "but he made me come."

"Yes," answered my lady bitterly, "he made you come; and he will make you come whenever he pleases, and whenever he wants money for the gratification of his low vices; and you and he are my pensioners as long as I live, or as long as I have any money to give; for I suppose when my purse is empty and my credit ruined, you and your husband will turn upon me and sell me to the highest bidder. Do you know, Phœbe Marks, that my jewel-case has been half emptied to meet your claims? Do you know that my pin money, which I thought such a princely allowance when my marriage settlement was made, and when I was a poor governess at Mr. Dawson's, Heaven help me—my pin money has been overdrawn half a year to satisfy your demands? What can I do to appease you? Shall I sell my Marie

Antoinette cabinet, or my Pompadour china, Leroy's and Benson's ormolu clocks, or my Gobelin tapestried chairs and ottomans? How shall I satisfy you next?"

"Oh, my lady, my lady," cried Phœbe, piteously, "don't be so cruel to me; you know, you know that it isn't I who want to impose upon you."

"I know nothing," exclaimed Lady Audley, "except that I am the most miserable of women. Let me think," she cried, silencing Phœbe's consolatory murmurs with an imperious gesture. "Hold your tongue, girl, and let me think of this business, if I can."

She put her hands to her forehead, clasping her slender fingers across her brow, as if she would have controlled the action of her brain by their convulsive pressure.

"Robert Audley is with your husband," she said, slowly, speaking to herself rather than to her companion. "Those two men are together, and there are bailiffs in the house, and your brutal husband is no doubt brutally drunk by this time, and brutally obstinate and ferocious in his drunk-

enness. If I refuse to pay this money his ferocity will be multiplied by a hundredfold. There's little use in discussing that matter. The money must be paid."

"But if you do pay it, my lady," said Phœbe, very earnestly, "I hope you will impress upon Luke that it is the last money you will ever give him while he stops in that house."

"Why?" asked Lady Audley, letting her hands fall on her lap, and looking inquiringly at Mrs. Marks.

"Because I want Luke to leave the Castle."

"But why do you want him to leave?"

"Oh, for ever so many reasons, my lady," answered Phœbe. "He's not fit to be the landlord of a public-house. I didn't know that when I married him, or I would have gone against the business, and tried to persuade him to take to the farming line. Not that I suppose he'd have given up his own fancy, though, either; for he's obstinate enough, as you know, my lady. He's not fit for his present business, though. He's scarcely ever sober after dark, and when he's drunk he gets

almost wild, and doesn't seem to know what he does. We've had two or three narrow escapes with him already."

"Narrow escapes!" repeated Lady Audley. "What do you mean!"

"Why, we've run the risk of being burnt in our beds through his carelessness."

"Burnt in your beds through his carelessness! Why, how was that?" asked my lady, rather listlessly. She was too selfish, and too deeply absorbed in her own troubles, to take much interest in any danger which had befallen her sometime lady's-maid.

"You know what a queer old place the Castle is, my lady; all tumble-down wood-work, and rotten rafters, and such like. The Chelmsford Insurance Company won't insure it, for they say if the place did happen to catch fire upon a windy night it would blaze away like so much tinder, and nothing in the world could save it. Well, Luke knows this, and the landlord has warned him of it times and often, for he lives close against us, and he keeps a pretty sharp eye upon all my

husband's goings on, but when Luke's tipsy he doesn't know what he's about, and only a week ago he left a candle burning in one of the out-houses, and the flame caught one of the rafters of the sloping roof, and if it hadn't been for me finding it out when I went round the house the last thing, we should have all been burnt to death perhaps. And that's the third time the same kind of thing has happened in the six months we've had the place, and you can't wonder that I'm frightened; can you, my lady?"

My lady had not wondered, she had not thought about the business at all. She had scarcely listened to these common-place details; why should she care for this low-born waiting woman's perils and troubles? Had she not her own terrors, her own soul-absorbing perplexities to usurp every thought of which her brain was capable.

She did not make any remark upon that which poor Phœbe had just told her; she scarcely comprehended what had been said, until some moments after the girl had finished speaking, when the words assumed their full meaning, as

some words do two or three minutes after they have been heard without being heeded.

"Burnt in your beds," said my lady, at last. "It would have been a good thing for me if that precious creature, your husband, had been burnt in his bed before to-night."

A vivid picture flashed upon her as she spoke. The picture of that frail wooden tenement, the Castle Inn, reduced to a roofless chaos of lath and plaster, vomiting flames from its black mouth and spitting sparks of fire upward towards the cold night sky.

She gave a weary sigh as she dismissed this image from her restless brain. She would be no better off even if this enemy should be for ever silenced. She had another and far more dangerous foe—a foe who was not to be bribed or bought off, though she had been as rich as an empress.

"I'll give you the money to send this bailiff away," my lady said, after a pause. "I must give you the last sovereign in my purse, but what of that? You know as well as I do that I dare not refuse you."

Lady Audley rose and took the lighted lamp from her writing-table. "The money is in my dressing-room," she said; "I will go and fetch it."

"Oh, my lady," exclaimed Phœbe, suddenly. "I forget something; I was in such a way about this business that I quite forgot it."

"Quite forgot what?"

"A letter that was given me to bring to you, my lady, just before I left home."

"What letter?"

"A letter from Mr. Audley. He heard my husband mention that I was coming down here, and he asked me to carry this letter."

Lady Audley set the lamp down upon the table nearest to her, and held out her hand to receive the letter. Phœbe Marks could scarcely fail to observe that the little jewelled hand shook like a leaf.

"Give it me—give it me," cried my lady; "let me see what more he has to say."

She almost snatched the letter from Phœbe's hand in her wild impatience. She tore open

the envelope and flung it from her; she could scarcely unfold the sheet of note-paper in her eager excitement.

The letter was very brief. It contained only these words:—

"Should Mrs. George Talboys really have survived the date of her supposed death, as recorded in the public prints, and upon the tomb-stone in Ventnor churchyard, and should she exist in the person of the lady suspected and accused by the writer of this, there can be no great difficulty in finding some one able and willing to identify her. Mrs. Barkamb, the owner of North Cottages, Wildernsea, would no doubt consent to throw some light upon this matter, either to dispel a delusion or to confirm a suspicion."

"Robert Audley.

"March 3rd, 1859.

"The Castle Inn, Mount Stanning."

My lady crushed the letter fiercely in her hand, and flung it from her into the flames.

"If he stood before me now, and I could kill him," she muttered in a strange inward whisper, "I would do it—I would do it!" She snatched up the lamp and rushed into the adjoining room. She shut the door behind her. She could not endure any witness of her horrible despair—she could endure nothing; neither herself nor her surroundings.

END OF VOL. II.

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